

Analyzing the Incidence of the Sister Classroom Strategy in Regard to the Communicative
Competence in 8th-Grade Students from a Bilingual Public School in Barranquilla,
Colombia

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Abstract

This paper examined the incidence of the Sister Classroom strategy in regard to the communicative competence in a group of 8th-grade students of a bilingual public school in Barranquilla, Colombia. The research was conducted through a qualitative case study using an inductive analysis method and employing mixed instruments of data collection such as document analysis and a Likert scale survey. The analysis of the data evidenced three major aspects that resulted from students' participation in multiple Sister Classroom sessions: cultural awareness enhancement, the articulation of language with meaningful contexts, and the construction of interpersonal connections. These at the same time were divided into two subcategories each to detail the incidence in these aspects.

It was concluded that these three aspects represented a great incidence on students in their communicative competence from the Sister Classroom strategy. Thanks to their exposure and interaction with students from other countries, they were able to develop and/or improve cultural, interpersonal, and sociolinguistic skills that contribute to the growth of bilingualism.

Keywords: case study, Sister Classroom strategy, bilingualism, communicative competence

Resumen

En esta investigación se analizó la incidencia de la estrategia Sister Classroom con respecto a la competencia comunicativa en un grupo de estudiantes de octavo grado de un colegio público bilingüe en Barranquilla, Colombia. La investigación se llevó a cabo mediante un estudio de caso cualitativo utilizando un método de análisis inductivo y utilizando instrumentos mixtos de recopilación de datos, como el análisis de documentos y encuestas escala de Likert. El análisis de los datos evidenció tres aspectos principales que resultaron de la participación de los estudiantes en múltiples sesiones de Sister Classroom: la mejora de la conciencia cultural, la articulación del lenguaje con contextos significativos y la construcción de conexiones interpersonales. Estos a su vez se dividieron en dos subcategorías cada uno para detallar la incidencia en estos aspectos.

Se concluyó que estos tres aspectos representaron una gran incidencia en los estudiantes con relación a su competencia comunicativa desde la estrategia Sister Classroom. Gracias a la exposición e interacción con estudiantes de otros países, lograron desarrollar y/o mejorar habilidades culturales, interpersonales y sociolingüísticas que contribuyen al crecimiento del bilingüismo.

Palabras clave: estudio de caso, estrategia Sister Classroom, bilingüismo, competencia comunicativa



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Introduction

It is noticeable that in recent years the Colombian government has worked alongside the local administrations, governors, mayors, and education departments to implement multiple projects and strategies to promote the teaching and learning of English as a foreign language, such as the National Bilingualism Program - PNB (2004), the Program to Strengthen the Development of Foreign Language Skills - PFDCLC (2010) and the National English Program - PNI (2015) (Bermudez & Parra, 2016). These projects have focused on the implementation of new technologies and media to improve the English communicative competence of teachers and students from public schools and hence promote their possibilities to access new knowledge, the ability to understand social phenomena, and their job skills and opportunities (Programa Nacional de Bilingüismo 2004-2019, n.d.; “El Ideal Educativo Del Nuevo Siglo” - 2009).

This research proposal focuses on determining the incidence of the Sister Classroom Strategy (from this point forward SCS) on the communicative competence in students of 8th grade from a bilingual public school in Barranquilla, Colombia. This analysis is based on the reality of public schools located in the capital of Atlántico which seek to strengthen the foreign language. From this point of view, this project will be developed considering national policies, the integration of a curriculum for bilingual strengthening in secondary education, and the influence this has on the implementation of bilingualism and bilingual learning environments.

The SCS theoretical foundation revolves around two main approaches: the virtual exchange approach by Erasmus Hilliker (2020) and the education-to-global citizenship approach by Maguth (2014). On the one hand, the virtual exchange approach entails a “set of activities where a constructive and interactive communication among individuals or

groups geographically separated and/or different cultural backgrounds take place, with the assistance of the teachers, using the dialogue and the socio-cultural exchange through digital technology” (Hilliker, 2020, as cited in Alcaldía de Barranquilla, 2022 P. 4). On the other hand, the education to global citizenship approach plays an essential role in the SCS since it contributes to the instruction and education of global citizens that are “intended to support and make part of the economic, social and cultural development of the region” (Maguth, 2014, as cited in Alcaldía de Barranquilla, 2022 P. 4). These two approaches require an integration of the curriculum and pedagogical practices intended to promote environments that enable global student communicative competence.

The SCS is carried out through interconnected virtual rooms on online meeting platforms, such as Zoom or Meet, between students from the United States or Canada and students from Barranquilla. The SCS is divided into four sections: Warm-up, Let’s talk!, Let’s discover!, and Let’s reflect!

Table 1

Stages of a Sister Classroom Strategy session.

Stage	Description
Warm-up	The warm-up states the beginning of the SCS session in terms of motivation and foreign language use, in this case, English. Its idea is to set the activities that activate the previous knowledge SCS students have. Over here we can use some games, songs, and challenges that motivate SCS students to learn, participate, talk, and have fun. Suggested activities: Charades, Scavenger Hunt, Riddles, hangman.
Let’s talk!	This stage is teacher-led. SCS teacher activates previous knowledge as well, however, it is intended to promote debates, and group

discussions, and get all possible information from the SCS students. The topic can be brought up through a photo, an image, or a video, followed by some questions related to it.

Let's discover! In this stage, SCS students start to communicate (student-led). It is recommended to divide into two groups using breakout rooms so that they can share presentations and ideas. The purpose of this stage is to motivate and encourage SCS students to be spontaneous, and build their trust in themselves and what they do.

Let's reflect! This is the final stage of the SCS session and nonetheless, equally important. Rubrics, surveys, open questions, and emojis can be used to reflect on the SCS session. It is fundamental to collect SCS student information since it is the one SCS needs to have feedback on the process, what went right, what went wrong, what can be improved, and get to know them better to make even more comfortable and meaningful SCS sessions.

Note. Taken and adapted from Alcaldía de Barranquilla (2022)

In the SCS implementation, there can be identified three main participants: SCS mentors, SCS teachers, and SCS students. The SCS mentors work closely with school administrators, academic coordinators, and/or bilingual lead teachers to organize and socialize the implementation of the strategy in terms of pedagogical support, data and evidence collection, legal consent, and follow-up. The SCS teachers are in charge of informing parents and students about SCS sessions, organizing the participants' list, planning and executing the SCS activities and sessions collaboratively with the correspondent SCS foreign teachers, and carrying out the evaluation of the process, among others (see Table 2). The SCS students are encouraged to participate actively during SCS sessions, make previous research about the assigned topic, speak always or mostly English, and use visual aids to communicate and interact dynamically.



Table 2

Sister Classroom Strategy Teachers Guidelines

PLANNING

- ✓ Set SCS online session schedules.
 - ✓ Keep permanent communication with the SCS mentor and the foreign teachers of the different SCS schools whenever he requires support.
 - ✓ Update himself in advance about the topic to discuss in the SCS session.
 - ✓ Plan SCS sessions collaboratively, along with the correspondent SCS school teacher, so that the different language usage and interest be balanced.
 - ✓ Check and test the activities to carry out in the SCS sessions.
 - ✓ Fill in the SCS session planning form.
 - ✓ Have plan B and carry it out (if necessary). SCS teachers are autonomous in the decision-making process, regarding SCS planning, as long as these are attached to the SCS's main interest and purpose.
-

DURING SCS SESSION

- ✓ Share and socialize each session goal and agenda.
 - ✓ Assign a pen pal to every SCS student so that they can communicate.
 - ✓ Give proper and clear instructions.
 - ✓ Make sure the SCS session instructions are clear and understood by making questions to the SCS students.
 - ✓ Encourage SCS students to participate and use English in the SCS session.
 - ✓ To rely on his/her SCS correspondent teacher whenever necessary.
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AFTER THE SCS SESSION

- ✓ Promote evaluation: to reflect on the things that were learned and on the experience.
 - ✓ Keep an accurate track of the SCS session attendants.
 - ✓ Give the nonattendance proper procedure, knowing who's missing, how often it happens, and why it happens.
 - ✓ Reflect on the implemented activities and pedagogical practices.
 - ✓ Share new experiences and ideas with SCS mentors and SCS teachers.
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Note. Taken and adapted from Alcaldía de Barranquilla (2022)

The SCS is part of the Soy Bilingüe program, which consists of a set of diverse projects or strategies that address different objectives and populations carried out firstly in

40 public schools by 2020; by 2021, it was already being implemented in 80 official schools, and according to the mayor Jaime Pumarejo it is expected to cover a total of 154 institutions in the city by the end of 2022 (Alcaldía de Barranquilla, 2021). The program articulates three strategy lines: First, *Unstoppable Teachers* strengthens the communicative, pedagogical, and collaborative skills of public institutions teachers in preschool, basic and secondary education, as part of a continuous professional development scheme. Second, *Glocal Students* promotes spaces and experiences of use and exposure to English among students, according to the demands and characteristics of the globalized economic environment, and third, *Bilingual City* seeks to turn the city into a laboratory of innovation for citizens through English programs from early childhood to higher education and access to employment. Despite the recent adoption of this program, it was already recognized as one of the five best practices of education secretariats by Foro Educativo Nacional 2021, *Aprendizajes y desafíos para el sistema educativo colombiano que retorna a la presencialidad en procura de la calidad y más y mejores oportunidades para niños, niñas y jóvenes*, granted by the Ministry of National Education of Colombia (Buena práctica Programa Soy Bilingüe, 2022).

The object of the study of this research (Determine The Incidence of The "Sister Classroom" Strategy In Regards To The Communicative Competence In 8th-Grade Students From a Bilingual Public School In Barranquilla, Colombia) focuses on the SCS, one of the strategies adopted by this program within the strategy line Glocal Students. The SCS's main objective is to "implement a virtual sociocultural exchange among Barranquilla official School students and some educational institutions abroad, as well as local bilingual and national ones to promote the communicative competence and oral practice of the



English language endorsement as a mean to communicate and create work opportunities"

(Alcaldía de Barranquilla, 2022, p. 3).

1. Literature Review

In order to set a path to guide the present analysis, this section aims to bring into focus the various theoretical constructs that contribute to it and the implementations of the SCS in 8th grade at a bilingual public school in Barranquilla.

1.1 Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL)

As it was previously mentioned, the Sister Classroom Strategy uses an intercultural approach promoting the exchange of experiences and customs with foreign classrooms to develop communicative competences in children and youth through collaborative learning. This then assumes the concept of intercultural bilingualism in which the importance of learning not only the foreign language but also the culture and the recognition of the other is distinguished (Mora & Rodríguez, 2015).

This intercultural methodology is based on Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) which helps to develop intercultural competences between students from different geographical areas and different language and cultural backgrounds that allows interchange experiences according to their same level of competence.

Nowadays the use of technology in a classroom is essential due to the importance of being connected to the world. When our students are able to be global thinkers, it is much more interesting and meaningful for them to learn in collaborative groups with others with distinct societal contexts. COIL can be implemented in several courses or areas. One example taken is how students from environmental engineering at the University of Dayton and the University of Ghana developed management project and communication skills, the intercultural skills, techniques, and tools helped them to enhance it through COIL (Appiah-Kubi & Annan, 2020).

1.2 Information and Communication Technology Tools (ICTs)

Nowadays the use of information and communication technology tools (ICTs) is considered a fundamental factor in education. Therefore, these play a key role in the SCS since the interaction takes place through technological platforms. In addition, globalization allows students to face new ways of learning, for instance before, during, and after post-pandemic challenges students use ICTs to learn differently.

ICTs have a positive effect on those students who can get in contact with technology to develop their competences. According to Ben Youssef et al. (2022), digital skills influence the intensity of ICT use and vice versa. It is generally accepted that the positive effects of ICTs on students' learning outcomes depend on the power of their use; using sparingly and sporadically does not improve learning outcomes. However, extensive use for educational purposes leads to improve skills and knowledge.

Thus, it is considerable to say that several aspects influence bilingual education, from all members of the educational community and their knowledge of the foreign language, the presence of the language in the institutional curriculum, the use of technological tools, the use of authentic material specific to the language and the inclusion of foreign culture.

1.2.1 Online and Intercultural Communication

The Sister Classroom Strategy is based on online practice where students interact and exchange experiences with other students from North America. Therefore, this method requires the integration of ICTs and language learning in real situations. As the beginning of the implementation of this strategy coincided with the lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic, it provided opportunities for students and teachers to access and use different tools or platforms to enhance their language learning and teaching (Christofi, 2020).

Foreign language education has been among the most enthusiastic users of online and intercultural communication as a learning tool, which is unsurprising. Since the early 1990s, foreign language teachers have recognized the possibility of connecting language learners with peers from other countries, engaging them in interaction with native speakers of other languages, and providing them with semi-authentic communication experiences in these languages.

Online and Intercultural Communication has been referred to as telecollaboration (Belz, 2003), telecollaboration 2.0 (Guth & Helm, 2010), e-tandem (O'Rourke, 2007), or Online Intercultural Exchange (O'Dowd, 2007; O'Dowd & Lewis, 2016) in foreign language education, and it has evolved into an integral part of Computer-Assisted Language Learning over the last 20 years.

1.3 Communicative Competence

Communicative competence was first introduced during the early 70s in a natural environment (non-classroom) where they develop effective communication in a written and oral form within a social interaction (Savignon, S. J. 2017). Stated in this form it is important to recognize that communicative competence could be expressed in the communication style chosen by the teacher and in the roles in communication, which are characterized by constant expressive features, as well as in the communication activity in the process of the communication situation, which sets the main goals of communication (Akhmedova, M. T., 2022).

According to MEN (2006), competence is a set of knowledge, skills, abilities, and individual characteristics that allow a person to perform actions in a given context. In the case of communicative competences, MEN (2006) articulated with CEFR (2001) establishing three communicative competences: linguistic, sociolinguistic, and pragmatic.

1.3.1 Linguistic competence

The set of knowledge, skills, and individual characteristics that enables a person to perform actions in a given context. This competence implies not only the theoretical handling of grammatical, orthographic, or semantic concepts but also their application in different situations.

1.3.2 Sociolinguistic competence

It refers to the knowledge of the social and cultural conditions that are implicit in the use of language. For example, it is used to manage norms of politeness and other rules that order relations between generations, genders, classes, and social groups. It is also handled when coming into contact with expressions of popular wisdom or with differences in the register, dialect, and accent.

1.3.3 Pragmatic competence

It is related to the functional use of linguistic resources and comprises, firstly, a discursive competence that refers to the ability to organize sentences in sequences to produce textual fragments. Secondly, it implies a functional competence to know both linguistic forms and their functions, as well as the way in which they are linked to each other in real communicative situations (MEN, 2006).

Besides the three previously mentioned communicative functions, many language teachers consider intercultural communicative competence (ICC) to be an extension of communicative competence: "Intercultural competence is, to a considerable part, the capacity to cope with one's cultural background in engagement with others" (Beneke, 2000, p. 109). With the current rapid progress of communicative language teaching approaches and technology, it is not so difficult to make language teaching content- or task-oriented when the content has a clear intercultural dimension. This is a well-understood and

comprehensive model in which intercultural communicative competence involves specific linguistic, sociolinguistic, and discursive attitudes, knowledge, skills, and competences (Kohn & Warth, n.d.).



2. Objectives

2.1 General Objective

Determine the incidence of the Sister Classroom strategy in regard to the communicative competence in a group of 8th-grade students from a bilingual public school in Barranquilla, Colombia.

2.2 Specific Objectives

- Identify the components of the Sister Classroom strategy for the development of communicative competence in a group of eighth-grade students in a public institution in the city of Barranquilla.
- Describe the perception of teachers and eighth-grade students regarding the implementation of the pedagogical strategy Sister Classroom and the development of communicative competence in English.
- Establish the results based on the pedagogical strategy Sister Classroom and its implementation, in terms of the advancement and development of the communicative competence of a group of eighth-grade students in a public institution in the city of Barranquilla.

3. Research Question

What is the incidence of the Sister Classroom strategy in regards to the communicative competence in a group of 8th-grade students from a bilingual public school in Barranquilla, Colombia?

4. Method

The following section establishes the methodology framework: research approach and type of study that was conducted to carry on the present analysis given its own research nature, case features, and population needs.

4.1 Research methodology

A qualitative methodology was chosen to conduct this study. According to Hatch (2002), qualitative studies try to capture the perspectives that actors use as a basis for their actions in specific social settings. This methodology is adequate for the present research since it addresses the study of the participants' viewpoint of the strategy SCS and its incidence in their foreign language communicative competence in a public school located in Barranquilla, Colombia.

The key points in defining qualitative methodology mentioned by Hatch (2002) are

- **Natural Settings.** Aims to understand how individuals make sense of their everyday lives.
- **Participant Perspectives.** Qualitative studies use the perspective of the actors as a basis for their actions in specific social settings.
- **Researcher as Data Gathering Instrument.** Highlight the importance of the values of the researcher by reflecting on their interaction before and during the project.
- **Wholeness and Complexity.** By Providing enough detail and actual data, they allow the reader to better understand what the researcher is attempting to explain.

- **Reflexivity.** Researchers can understand human action by getting close to it through reflexive abilities, keeping track of one's incidence on a situation, gauging one's biases, and monitoring one's emotional reactions.

It was a case study with an exploratory level that aims to identify the Sister Classroom Strategy components, to interpret the selected participants' description and to establish the relationship between the strategy's implementation results and the emerging categories regarding the triangulation of information. According to Schock (2020) approaching a topic while using a case study will allow researchers to design a space-time analysis that focuses on setting boundaries within the unit of study. In this case, the student sample reflected to interpret in depth the phenomenon of the SCS and the interaction among the individuals studied in this research (Takahashi & Araujo, 2020). Furthermore, multiple sources of data were used such as surveys of the selected participants, literature reviews from 2018 onwards, scholarly journal articles, and government reports.

4.2 Setting

In this section, the context in which this project took place is described in detail. The school is an official institution, located in the southwest of the city of Barranquilla, recognized as the first public school to offer a bilingual curriculum education from preschool to secondary level (Alcaldía de Barranquilla, 2022). According to the school PEI, it aims to form integrally bilingual women and men, based on critical-social pedagogy, through training in basic, citizenship, technological, general, and specific labor competencies; and the development of communicative and socio-cultural skills so that they may assume commitments to social transformation. To do so, the school is methodologically based on different approaches such as Vigotsky's theory of

socio-constructivism, Ausubel's theory of meaningful learning, Habermas's theory of communicative action, and Gardner's multiple intelligences theory, among others.

4.3 Participants

4.3.1 Selection Criteria

In order to fulfill the objective of this analysis which is to determine the incidence of the SCS in regard to the communicative competence in a group of 8th-grade students from a bilingual public school in Barranquilla - Colombia, a selective process was carried out to filter and consolidate the group of subjects of the study. First of all, the school was informed about the research intentions and asked for their corresponding permission. After receiving their confirmation (see [Appendix A](#)), a letter of informed consent was sent to all 8th-grade students and their teacher which contained the objective of the project, the procedures, and the ethical criteria for information handling. It is important to highlight that only students from 8th grade who had engaged in at least 3 virtual meetings with their foreign homonyms and who were also characterized by their active participation in the strategy were convened to participate in the study.

Subsequently, eighteen students agreed to take part in the study and sent their signed consent (see [Appendix B](#)) as well as the teacher. Nevertheless, during the data collection process, only a group of 14 students and their English teacher replied to the inquiries. For reasons of research coding and organization from this point forward the subjects of the study, the teacher and the 18 students, will be referred to as T and S1, S2, S3, etc.

4.4 Instruments

The study uses two instruments: document analysis and a Likert scale (from now on DA and LS, respectively) (See [Table 3](#)). The first, according to Bowen, G. (2009) “as a research method is particularly applicable to qualitative case studies—intensive studies

producing rich descriptions of a single phenomenon, event, organization, or program” like the present analysis. This method consists of a systematic process to review, examine, and interpret diverse documents, either printed or digital. In this study, the researchers addressed multiple materials from the SCS pedagogical outline, students’ descriptive reports (provided by the teacher) before and after the strategy was implemented, and class recording.

The second, the LS corresponds to a psychometrics technique that consists of a set of statistical models and methods designed primarily to summarize, describe, and draw conclusions from empirical data obtained from human judgment. (Jones, L. V. et al., 2007). This was employed to capture the teacher’s and students’ perceptions of the SCS strategy on the development of communicative competencies. The LS was applied using online survey software to facilitate the distribution and collection of the data (See [Appendix C](#)).

Table 3

Instruments’ description

Instruments and data collection instruments	Time	Focus
<p>Document analysis (DA)</p> <p>A. Documents related to the SCS pedagogical proposal, competencies, and policy framework for learning English foreign language in the eighth year of secondary school, studies, or background.</p> <p>B. Students’ reports before and after the strategy is implemented,</p>	<p>A three-month period during the first semester of 2022</p>	<p>A. Identify the components of the "Sister Classroom" strategy for the development of communicative competence.</p> <p>B. Contrast and validate the program results on students’ competency levels.</p>
<p>Likert Scale (LS)</p>	<p>A three-month period at the</p>	<p>Collect and examine the</p>



A standard survey consisting of 10 statements in which the teacher and students have to respond with a range of 5 values.

beginning of the second semester of 2022

teacher's and students' attitudes and opinions on the Sister Classroom strategy for the development of communicative competencies.

5. Analysis and findings

An inductive method was implemented to articulate the varied data collected through the previous instruments. This method, according to Hatch (2002), consists of a previously detailed analysis of the contextualized phenomenon that results in the discovery of patterns in the data, which then become frames of analysis or domains. After that, the data is coded and revised into the respective domains. Consequently, each domain is thoroughly described and supported by data excerpts.

As a starting point to answer the research question "What is the incidence of the SCS on the communicative competence of a group of 8th-grade students of a public school in Barranquilla, Colombia?", the objectives proposed in this project are followed up. First, in order to identify the components of the SCS for the development of communicative competence in a group of eighth-grade students in a public institution in the city of Barranquilla, document analysis was carried out through the documentary matrix below which contains the multiple gathered references aligned to the SCS and its components and the emerging domains identified during its analysis (see [Table 4](#)).

For the analysis, it was possible to identify three major categories or domains that repeatedly arose in the documentary frame of reference. These are (a) cultural awareness enhancement **-in magenta-**, (b) articulating language with meaningful contexts **-in green-**, and (c) construction of interpersonal connections **-in blue-**. These three factors are considered reference points to connect the rest of the data without ruling out the possibility that other lines of interest may emerge.



Table 4

Documentary matrix

Document selection criteria	Purpose (objective)	Reference	Highlights through codification (main ideas)	Interpretation: Contribution to the study	Emerging categories
Documents related to the pedagogical proposal SCS, competencies, and the policy framework.	Identify and contextualize the components of the pedagogical proposal SCS regarding its scope in public schools, purpose, and implementation guidelines.	Alcaldía de Barranquilla. (2022). Sister Classroom Strategy (SCS) - Pedagogical Outline. Glocal Students' Strategy Line. Soy Bilingüe Program.	-SCS is a sociocultural exchange approach intended to promote English language practice in order to communicate and endorse work opportunities. -Improving communicative competence development through collaborative learning within an intercultural and linguistic context.	This document provides a complete understanding of the SCS and its objectives in language learning and communicative competences development.	a / b / c
	Define, socialize, and provide guidance on the standards of communicative competencies children should develop at the end of each group of levels so that the purposes of the educational system are unified in a coherent manner.	Ministerio de Educación Nacional (2006) Estándares Básicos de Competencias en Lenguas Extranjeras: Inglés. Formar en lenguas extranjeras: ¡el reto! Lo que necesitamos saber y saber hacer. https://www.mineducacion.gov.co/1759/articulos-115174_archivo_pdf.pdf	The National Bilingualism Program aims "to achieve citizens capable of communicating in English, so that they can insert the country into the processes of universal communication, in the global economy and cultural openness , with internationally comparable standards".	The English standards offer a guideline of what we should expect 8th-grade students to do in the foreign language according to the proposed communicative competences.	a
	Describe in a comprehensive way what language learners have to learn to do in order to use a language for	Council of Europe. (2001). Common European framework of reference for languages: Learning, teaching, assessment.	The language learning approach is action-oriented, it views users and learners of a language primarily as social agents . In an intercultural approach , it is a central objective of language	The CEFR contributes with a wide characterization and description of the communicative competences and their	a / b / c



	<p>communication and what knowledge and skills they have to develop so as to be able to act effectively.</p>	<p>Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. https://rm.coe.int/16802fc1bf</p>	<p>education to promote the development of the learner's whole personality and sense of identity in response to the enriching experience of otherness in language and culture. Communicative competences enable students to develop an enriched, more complex personality and an enhanced capacity for further language learning and greater openness to new cultural experiences. The learner does not simply acquire two distinct, unrelated ways of acting and communicating, they become plurilingual and develop interculturality. Language learning booster existential competence, considered as the sum of the individual characteristics which concern, for example, self-image and one's view of others and willingness to engage with other people in social interaction.</p>	<p>sub-components, as well as how these can be evidenced in the use of language.</p>	
	<p>Describe how virtual exchange, as an alternative to studying abroad, fosters language learning, cultural competencies, and interaction with</p>	<p>Hilliker, S. (2020). Virtual Exchange as a Study Abroad Alternative to Foster Language and Culture Exchange in TESOL Teacher Education. TESL-EJ,</p>	<p>-Virtual exchange challenges students to address new topics and interact with foreign language native speakers. -During these interactions students have the opportunity to apply their knowledge within a specific context.</p>	<p>This study gives us some ideas on how virtual exchange may come into play regarding students' communicative competences and their foreign language learning process. Besides, it</p>	<p>a / b / c</p>



		23(4), n4.Retrieved from: https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1242714.pdf	-Students learn about multiple cultural and language ties. -Students recognize the idea of stereotypes .	presents us with a similar research methodology which serves as a guide for our analysis.	
	Design and implementation of a digitally mediated global learning project to promote language learning, cross-cultural understandings, and global learning.	Maguth, B. (2014). Digital bridges for global awareness: Pre-service social studies teachers' experiences using technology to learn from and teach Students in Thailand. Journal of International Social Studies, 4(1), 42-59. Retrieved from: https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1149452.pdf	-Participants found the project authentic and significant for their learning process. -They had the opportunity to learn the language, skills, and attitudes. -They recognized the importance of getting to know individual students and their communities . -They carried out a self-reflection process . -The project served as a complement to the curriculum to enhance core concepts . -They developed understanding and skills in building relationships with others . -Understanding culture's role in the learning process . -Contribution of these experiences to their professional growth.	This research study evidenced some of the principal goals of the Sister Classroom strategy. Therefore, it contributes to a wide understanding of how the SCS aims to focus on students' competences inside and outside school, broadening students' perception of the English language and culture through interconnected classrooms.	a / b / c
Documents to validate program outcomes of the implementation of the strategy.	Report on students and parents the student's academic performance in English subject during the 1st and 2nd terms of the school year.	Students' English reports throughout the first semester of 2022	The first semester students' English reports show a contrasting difference between the results of the first and second term. However, the negative tendency result may have been corrupted by an extraordinary situation when there was a teacher substitution.	These reports provide a quantifiable tool to ponder students' skills achievement through their academic performance.	none
	Keep track of students'	Teacher's field notes.	The experiential learning provided by this strategy gave them an	This characterization of the teacher's experience	a / b / c



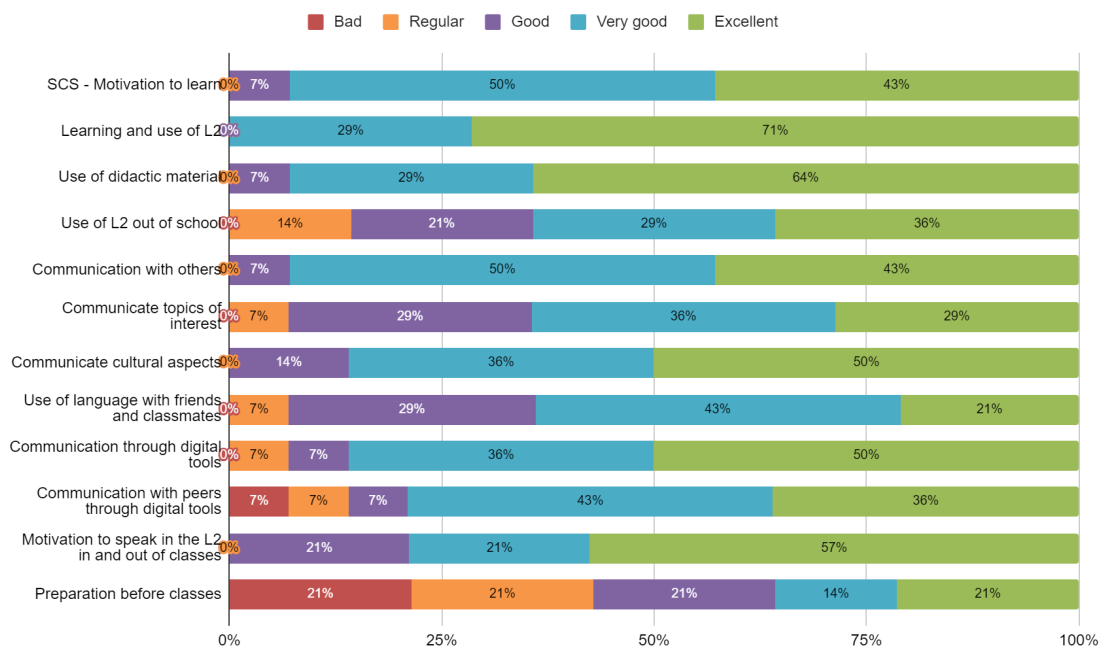
	<p>participation, attitudes, and perceptions during the SCS sessions.</p>		<p>extraordinary opportunity to create spaces to build meaningful learning through self-exploration and experimentation. -had the opportunity to practice, and speak authentic English with foreign students. In addition, they were able to learn about their culture and interests. -a process of interaction and intercommunication of several subjects was evidenced, in which the protagonism, attitude, and motivation of the student were observed. -understanding and learning more of the culture of the students of the other institution they developed international skills and values. -they were able to develop communication skills and social skills -they proved they could overcome their fear of speaking and be fascinated to know that they can decode messages in English and produce them at the same time</p>	<p>evidenced by the strategy incidence on students' attitudes, language learning process, and communicative competence from a closer point of view. This serves as a starting point to analyze the contributions of this strategy to the construction of a bilingual learning environment.</p>	
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Following the order of ideas, the second objective of this study seeks to describe the perception of teachers and eighth-grade students regarding the implementation of the SCS and the development of communicative competence in English. As was previously explained this was measured through the LS and applied to the study sample consisting of 14 students in eighth grade from the school.

The following is a detailed graph of the results obtained from LS (see [Figure 1](#)). It indicates that most students consider the SCS as “very good” for developing their English skills. It also shows the great acceptance of the SCS in the surveyed population, being this an innovative practice with a novel bilingual environment where the interaction takes place through digital tools with students from other countries, which generates great expectation and motivation in the students.

Figure 1

LS students' results graphically represented



Source: Own elaboration from data obtained through QuestionPro.

Furthermore, the analysis of the graph demonstrates that students interact in English outside the educational context, however, there is no marked difference between those students who regularly use English outside the school context for academic or personal reasons. On a personal level, students feel confident when interacting in English in contexts other than the educational context, and taking into account the results of the whole survey we can partially conclude that the SCS has had a positive incidence on most of the surveyed students, being this a strategy aimed precisely at improving the interaction of students through the strengthening of communication skills such as listening and speaking. This added to the cultural exchange generated by the interaction with students from other countries.

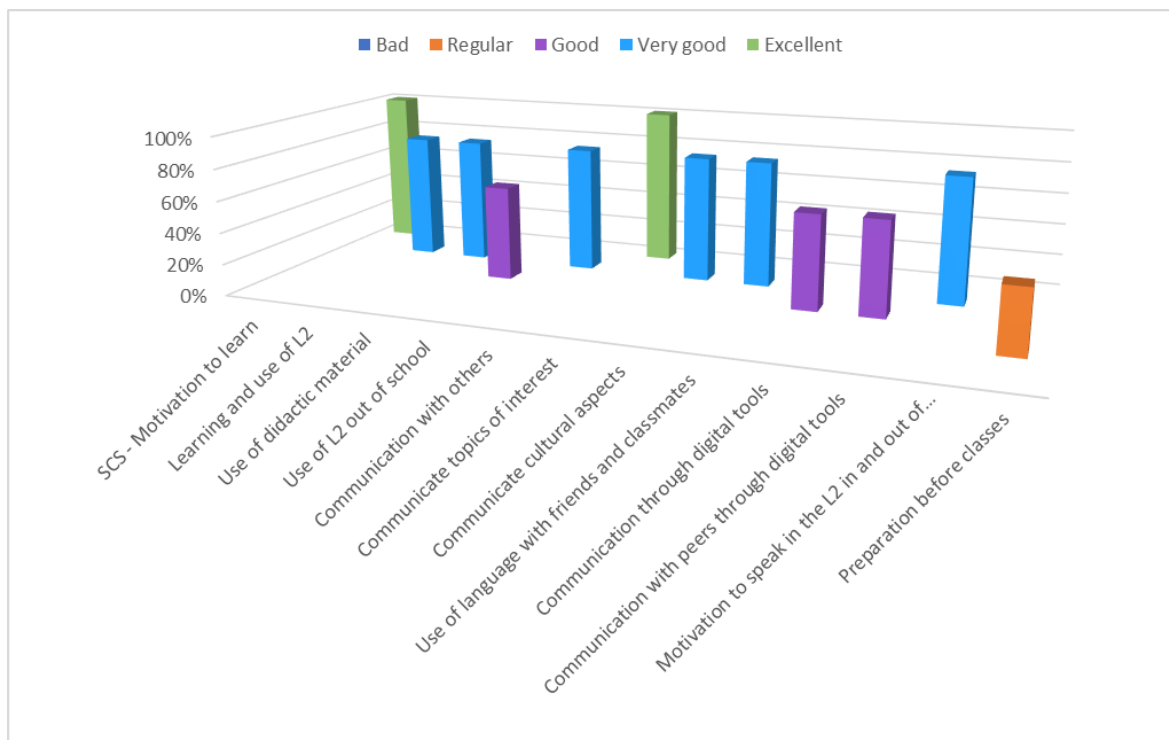
As for the formerly established domains, in the LS students' results is possible to observe that (a) cultural awareness enhancement is incited since students are inclined to share and communicate cultural aspects with others; there is also evidence that students (b) articulate language within meaningful contexts using English in and out of school in conversations with their (c) interpersonal connections with peers, friends, and families.

On the other hand, from the teacher's perception (see [Figure 2](#)), the SCS responds effectively to its proposed objectives. The SCS gave teachers and students an extraordinary opportunity to create spaces to build meaningful learning through self-exploration and experimentation. Besides, the process of interaction and intercommunication of several subjects was evidenced, in which the student's protagonism, attitude, and motivation were observed. The results conclude that students were able to discover the differences and similarities between their culture and a new one, developed international skills and values, and expand communication and social skills proving that they could overcome their fear of

speaking and were fascinated to know that they could decode messages in English and produce them at the same time.

Figure 2

LS teacher's results graphically represented

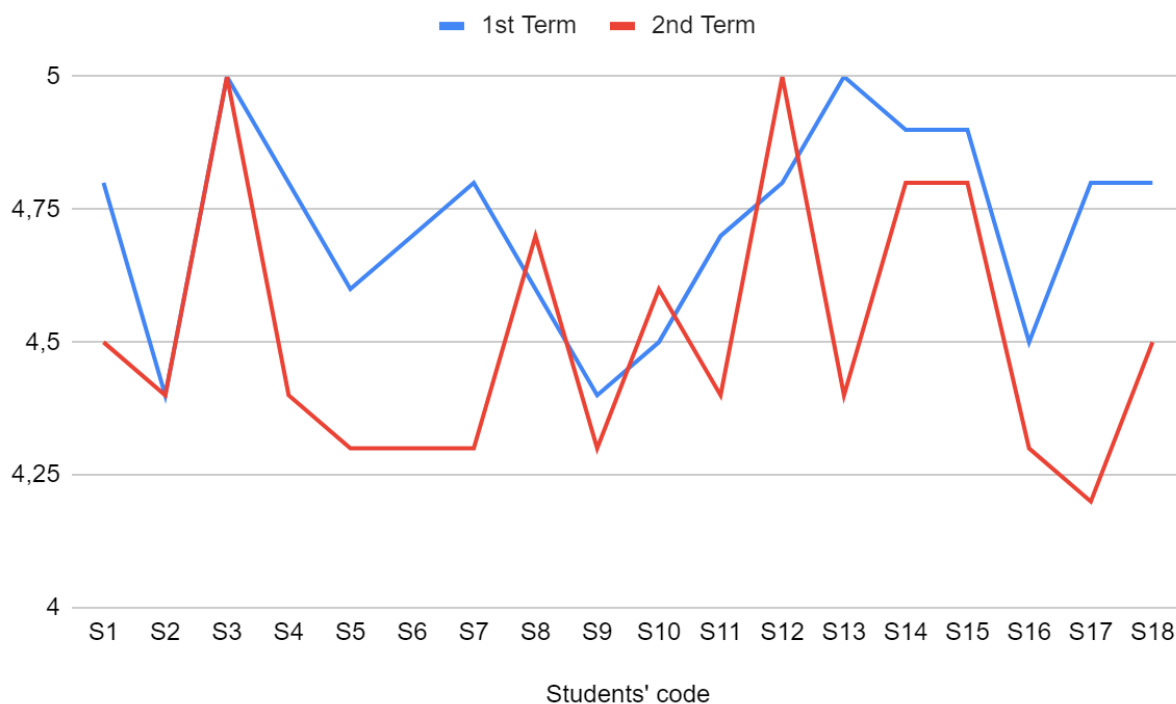


Source: Own elaboration from data obtained through QuestionPro.

In order to reach the third objective of the present analysis which aims to establish the results based on the SCS and its implementation, in terms of the advancement and development of the communicative competence of a group of eighth-grade students in a public institution in the city of Barranquilla, the students' English reports from the first semester of the school year 2022 were gathered and graphed (see [Figure 3](#)).

Figure 3

Students' English reports 2022-1



Source: Own elaboration from data obtained from school students' reports.

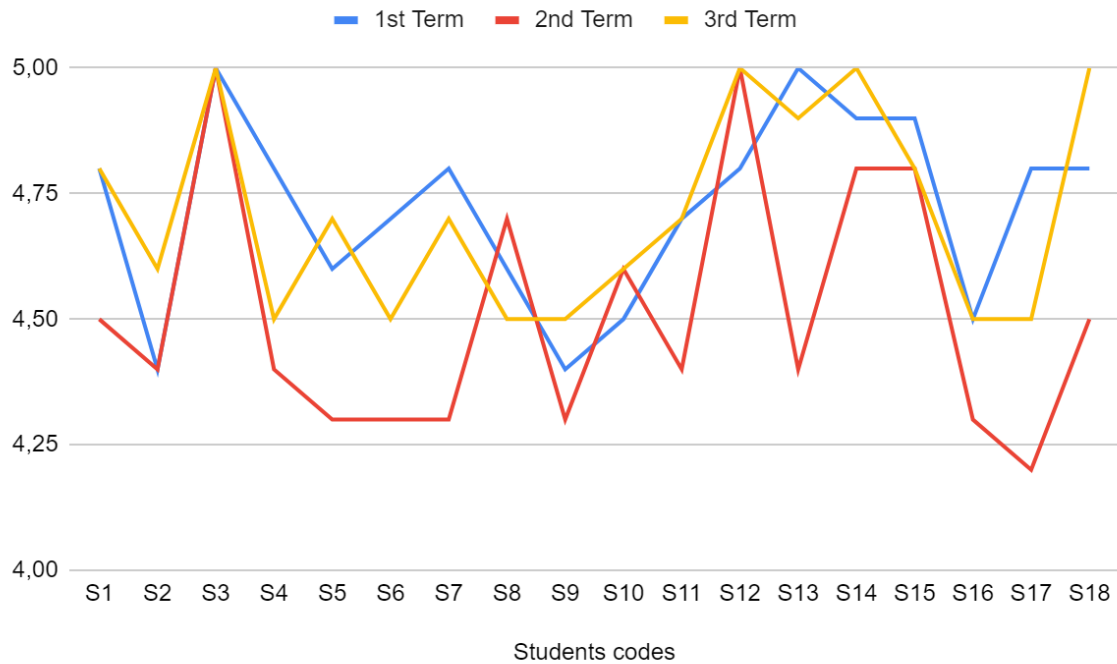
In Figure 2 we can observe that during the first and second terms there was a significant behavior in the students' scores. During the first term, the mean of the scores moved statistically from 4.75 to 4.8 with a predicted high trend for the second term. Nevertheless, during the second term, the rating scale started to decrease from 4.5 developing a declining score and maintaining the same mean of 4.5 since the beginning of the term. This trend might have developed in the second term due to the fact that the English teacher was replaced by another teacher and during this adaptation period the trend of the marks was downward. It is important to note that students' scores were always kept above 4.5 which is very positive since the students are not on a basic scale in their reports.

Given the tendency towards a decrease in the scores of the eighth-grade students in the second term, we proceeded to compare the scores to the third academic term ([see Figure 4](#)), thus obtaining the following results: The trend was always upward starting a little above

4.75 and staying balanced between 4.6-4.7 and closing the trend at 5.0. This possibly demonstrates that the SCS has a positive effect on the students' performance and therefore an incidence on their academic results.

Figure 4

Students' English reports 2022(1st to 3rd Term)



Source: Own elaboration from data obtained from school students' reports.

6. Discussion and conclusions

The SCS seeks to implement a general strategy of virtual exchanges between students from Barranquilla and institutions abroad, and local and national bilingual schools to improve communicative competence and promote the intercultural practice of English as a vehicle for communication and generation of opportunities.

Regarding the main project's objective aimed to determine the incidence of the Sister Classroom strategy in regard to the communicative competence in a group of 8th-grade students from a bilingual public school in Barranquilla, Colombia, the three categories established through the analysis procedure will be described:

6.1 Cultural awareness enhancement

It was the first category that through the analysis of data evidenced that the participants of SCS achieved just a level of cultural interchange that consisted of expressing ideas about their own cultures through music, the food, celebrations, clothing, seasons, sports among others.

Certainly, the students were assigned to develop a topic and initiate a communicative thread. Although the platform involved participants from Canada, the USA, and Colombia, the project focused on data from the national context, settled in the city of Barranquilla. While collecting data, students reported that through the platform assignments, they interchanged cultural information mostly from their regional origin and their everyday life.

While interpreting the dimension of cultural awareness, it was noticed that the results illustrated in [figure 4](#), evidenced high results regarding the results of the first, second, and third terms of the English course. Quantitative results were positive, but

through the research exercise, it is also significant to evaluate the possibility and the necessity of going beyond an intercultural interchange.

Regarding this category, two sub-categories were identified:

6.1.1 Addressing interculturality in the language learning environment

Respect, fairness, equity, and equality are the guiding values of intercultural communication. As a result, it makes sense to begin in the classroom by replicating outside encounters with classroom interactions. Teachers need to teach their students that having differences is normal and that using language to resolve those differences or potential confrontations can help. In [figure 2](#) the results indicate that students converse in English outside of the classroom, but there is no discernible difference between those who do so frequently for academic or non-academic purposes. On a personal level, students felt comfortable speaking and interacting in English outside of the classroom. Based on the survey's overall findings, we can infer that most of the surveyed students responded favorably to the SCS, which is a strategy designed specifically to enhance student interaction by enhancing communication skills. This increased the cultural interchange brought on by the interactions with international students. "Interculturality must paramount all the relationships at the school and it must be reinforced throughout projects which foster diversity. For instance, a cultural exchange where the different cultures of the school can be recognized and valued" (Floréz et al.,2022, p.175).

6.1.2 Fostering culture's role in the learning process

The integration of intercultural competence into education can be accomplished in several ways: through a whole school approach, cross-curricular themes, integration in subjects as a transversal objective, especially in the language (mother tongue education, bilingual and multilingual education), and through extra-curricular activities and pupil

mobility. However, Teachers can better foster intercultural competence in students by providing them with many opportunities to communicate and interact with counterparts from diverse cultures. Giorgis (2018, as cited in Amara, 2020, p. 29) stated that “language can be taught fruitfully side by side with intercultural education”. A good example of this is shown in [figure 4](#) where the SCS produced a positive result in communicating cultural aspects as well as the motivation of the students while they were interacting with their foreign peers.

Cultural awareness enhancement represented a significant factor in the student's interest and motivation toward the SCS sessions and other school activities. Rather than teaching students how to become intercultural speakers, it is more important that teachers instill this concept in their students. It is also important that projects that foster diversity are reinforced. For instance, a cultural exchange program should be conducted. It is also important to learn about other cultures, as it helps us defend our identity. Teachers should encourage students to interact with other people in order to develop a deeper understanding of each other. This can be done through cooperative and collaborative work in the classroom.

6.2 Articulation of language with meaningful contexts

The goal of a pedagogical environment is to create a framework that enables the teacher and the language learner to reach their goals. This process involves establishing a set of goals, discussing the procedure of reaching them, and developing a strategy for achieving them. In addition to monitoring and correcting students' progress, the teacher also produces an assessment and designs the next phase of studies.

The various environments that exist in a language learner's life are interrelated, and they create the ideal conditions for the development of a competent personality. The

interactive study process was a vital part of the learning process that helped students develop their communicative competence as we noticed in [figure 1](#). Every time a language learner uses a foreign language to achieve their goals, they create a new linguistic environment. This process was related to the student's intellectual and emotional activity. All the above, helped us to identify two sub-categories:

6.2.1 Building relationships beyond the classroom

Salmela-Aro (2009, as cited in OECD, 2019, p. 7) stated that “Parents, peers, teachers and the wider community influence a student’s sense of agency, and that student influences the sense of agency of his or her teachers, peers and parents – a virtuous circle that positively affects children’s development and well-being” which is the key to build a proper relationship between all the parties involved. The traditional teaching model requires teachers to deliver knowledge through evaluation and instruction. In the SCS students were encouraged to develop their own learning through active participation, they are more likely to ask questions, express their opinions, and make challenging statements. This type of learning also helps them develop their communication skills and analytical abilities as we notice in [figures 1](#) and [2](#) respectively, where satisfactory results were obtained in regards to communication in L2 not only inside the classroom but also outside.

6.2.2 Gaining confidence and positioning student’s agency

Students' agency relates to “the development of an identity and a sense of belonging. When students develop agency they rely on motivation, hope, self-efficacy, and a growth mindset to navigate towards well-being” (OECD, 2019, p.5). The SCS Students developed a stronger sense of independence and confidence to communicate as is evidenced in [table 1](#) with positive results in terms of the motivation to use L2 in and out of classes. This type of learning also helps them improve their persistence and academic

performance. It can additionally help them become more engaged in their communities. Through active involvement, children can learn about the importance of being responsible citizens and participating in the political process.

The articulation of language with meaningful contexts, as one of the SCS's main objectives, was evidenced throughout the LS students' and the teacher's results since they recognized the increase in the use of the foreign language in varied familiar and educational settings. In other words, it is closely linked to the development of a child's skills through their cooperation with their teachers and parents. This process allows them to develop their ethical attitudes such as values, norms, limits, and meanings, vital components of global competencies.

6.3 Construction of interpersonal connections

The interactions of people are known to influence a person's behavior and learn from others directly. One of the purposes of SCS was to seek interaction between Colombian students and North American students in order to create, learn, and participate in those interpersonal relationships through all the tools and topics provided during sessions such as music, food, celebrations, clothing, seasons, sports, among others, using the foreign language. This dynamic engaged students through practice in order to produce and communicate themselves using different contexts of their lives (Canagarajah, 2013; García, 2009; Heller, 2007). In [figure 1](#) it is noticed the regular communication, participation, and interaction among the students, their friends, and classmates; and the interaction outside the classroom on a high frequency which means that the incidence was very positive. This construction of interpersonal connections showed us two other subcategories.

6.3.1 Integrating language through communication with classmates and friends

Learning requires interaction, even for acquiring any language, this has been discussed in several theories from the earliest pedagogues' like Vygotsky's socio-constructivism, Rogers' experimental learning, and Bandura's social learning to the most recent education trends such as the STEM approach. Therefore, when learning foreign languages most methods prioritize constant communication between teacher-students and students-students. However, this learning process also takes place outside the educational scenario, students, as shown in [figure 1](#), build social networks around their community and familiar context which provide them with patterns of interaction in their learning process.

In his study, Palfreyman (2011) highlights the importance of considering language as a social capital rather than a “static body of knowledge” (p. 23). Hence, language is learned in social networks, which differ from the household, peer group, and neighborhood, that offer learners different inputs. In this way, students involved in the SCS are exposed to the foreign language through interaction with foreign peers and simultaneously they are benefiting each other in authentic and real communication.

6.3.2 Communicating through digital resources

SCS promoted the use of digital communication to achieve effective interaction between students from Colombia and North America. Note digital communication as the exchange of information using any digital media including text messages, emails, blogs, vlogs, social networks, and video conferences. All this in order to keep in touch with peers, teachers, and parents, among others from the pedagogical perspective of fostering intercultural communication among peers.

The digital scenario given during the sessions in SCS allowed students to interact directly with their classmates from North America using platforms such as Zoom, Meet and Google to develop video conferences in the classroom. When students do not have some

opportunities to communicate or connect to the world through the Internet, computers, tablets or cellphones, the schools and districts must give them these additional tools or opportunities such as computers labs, strategies, E-books, online libraries, extracurricular activities to make up the difference. Ribble, M. (2011, October).

We could notice a great percentage of approval in [figure 1](#) when students interact with their classmates in the classrooms, out of it, and with their peers from North America using digital devices.

The construction of interpersonal connections, not only between students and teachers but also with the communities around the school or online, allows students to put into practice their language proficiency in a real immediate context. SCS students have shown quite a progress in this aspect, in moving their interactions outside the classroom they demonstrate a willingness toward a bilingual education and therefore a bilingual society. Their eagerness to find and secure interactions in a foreign language with people from other countries and cultures has increased and with it the tendency of making the most of those encounters in order to learn more about them.

6.4 Limitations and further research

We can conclude with satisfaction that the incidence is positive but not perfect in the whole community, in the city, and in the country as a clear example of discipline and perseverance that is reflected in how a public school managed to permeate scenarios that years ago seemed impossible, in how at the end of school life it manages to deliver to society young people with the added value of bilingualism.

It is worth mentioning that the path of the research was challenging. Despite the bilingual technical educational institution being very careful with its students allowing us to do this research in order to improve and continue growing, we faced various setbacks

during the data collection. Nevertheless, we committed as responsible researchers as well as the students who, through their teacher, had a great disposition and responded willingly.

Finally, from the Master's Degree in Bilingual Learning Environments, we want to leave an open window for future research on SCS where we can articulate or implement new strategies that feed and nurture SCS such as Smart Classrooms, STEM strategies, implementation of ICTs in a bilingual classroom, among others, taking into account that some public schools do not have resources or scenarios suitable for the development of certain activities that require changes in infrastructure and access to first-hand technology and internet.



APPENDIX

[Appendix A](#)

[Appendix B](#)

Appendix C

Surveys

- Teacher's survey: <https://questionpro.com/t/AVpQKZtEoW>
- Students' survey: <https://questionpro.com/t/AVpQKZtCJv>

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Tables

[Table 1. Stages of a Sister Classroom Strategy session](#)

[Table 2. Sister Classroom Strategy Teachers Guidelines](#)

[Table 3. Instruments' description](#)

[Table 4. Documentary matrix](#)

Figures

[Figure 1. LS student's results graphically represented](#)

[Figure 2. LS teacher's results graphically represented](#)

[Figure 3. Students' English reports 2022-1](#)

[Figure 4. Students' English reports 2022\(1st to 3rd Term\)](#)