I propose in this paper a two-step definition of international entrepreneurship. It is first a process of change in the capacity of individuals, groups or organizations to perceive and evaluate opportunities in the international sphere. This capacity evolves through a learning process. The result of this process – the second step of the definition – is an increase in innovative international activities, such as the implementation of new products or services jointly with foreign partners.

Even though international entrepreneurship is a relatively recent area of study and research, it shares with the other subfields of entrepreneurship a tendency to address heterogeneous topics. Not only are the topics diversified, but the theoretical and methodological approaches are also disparate, which precludes for the moment any unifying epistemological and paradigmatic stance. Another feature of international entrepreneurship is its capacity to draw epistemological influences from two different fields – entrepreneurship and international business. The term "epistemology" is used here to refer to "knowledge of knowledge", that is the more or less articulate assumptions that researchers have about the nature and forms of knowledge. In entrepreneurship research, the epistemological question that is central to this paper is: What are the researchers’ conceptions of the way in which entrepreneurs acquire and use knowledge about opportunities? That issue is rarely raised in entrepreneurship research. Assumptions about the nature and forms of knowledge are usually implicit and must be inferred. In this paper I propose a classification of these assumptions.

To guide us in this classification process, Burrell and Morgan (1979) elaborated a grid on which epistemological assumptions can be analyzed. That grid supposes that epistemological assumptions are mutually exclusive – in that it is impossible to consider knowledge under their tangible and intangible forms concurrently. Even if this dichotomous classification of epistemological assumptions is debatable, it is a useful starting point for our analysis of the epistemological positions in the literature on entrepreneurship and international business. Three main categories of assumptions regarding knowledge can be identified in the literature on entrepreneurship and international business.

In the first category, knowledge is conceived as tangible and easily codifiable. This approach to knowledge is shared by the Schumpeterians in entrepreneurship and by the proponents of the internalization approach in international business. The second way of conceiving knowledge consists in emphasizing its tacit and idiosyncratic aspects. This conception has been developed at the organizational level by the neo-Schumpeterians and evolutionary theorists in entrepreneurship as well as in international business. Dunning’s eclectic model of internationalization is also based on that conception. Finally, the cognitive approach also emphasizes the tacit nature of knowledge, while also focusing on the micro analysis of knowledge flows in organizations. The information-processing view of entrepreneurship and the learning-based model of internationalization belong in this category.

In the final section of the paper, I examine the possibility of integrating these different assumptions. Considering the complex and dynamic nature of entrepreneurial phenomena, the integration of different epistemological viewpoints may be conducive to richer theoretical formulations and more elaborate methodological approaches.