

Virtual Exchange in the new educational landscape: Challenges for foreign language teachers

Virtual Exchange (VE) refers to the numerous online learning initiatives and methodologies which bring learners in online collaborative projects together with partners from different cultural backgrounds as part of their study programmes and under the guidance of teachers or trained facilitators (O'Dowd, 2023). Its potential for giving learners authentic experiences of intercultural communication has made it a common practice in foreign language classrooms. However, VE in foreign language education has evolved significantly in recent years from its early focus on bilingual North-North partnerships to encompass diverse global collaborations, including North-South exchanges and partnerships with conflict zones.

While VE has gained increased recognition as a valuable tool for internationalisation — particularly following COVID-19— this expansion has generated complex pedagogical and ethical challenges that practitioners must navigate. In this presentation I will examine six critical areas of concern: structural inequalities in project design that risk reproducing Global North hegemony; communication barriers in lingua franca contexts that advantage privileged learners; the psychological risks of engaging students with conflict zone partners; political and institutional pressures surrounding controversial partnerships; questions about VE's capacity for genuine social impact versus tokenistic engagement; and maintaining motivation among increasingly internationally-experienced student populations.

Drawing on recent literature and over two decades of practice, I argue that VE's transition from niche activity to mainstream educational tool demands more sophisticated approaches that address power imbalances, provide robust linguistic scaffolding, implement trauma-informed protocols, and move beyond superficial intercultural encounters. I will conclude with recommendations for developing more equitable, effective, and engaging VE programmes that can navigate the tensions between educational aspirations and global realities.