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ARTICLE

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

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Abstract

Virtual Exchange (VE) in foreign language education has evolved significantly 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. This article examines 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. The article concludes with recommendations for developing more equitable, effective, and engaging VE programmes that can navigate the tensions between educational aspirations and global realities.

Keywords: virtual exchange; blended mobility; global citizenship education; equity and inclusion

Language(s) Learned in This Study: *English, Spanish, Portuguese*

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Introduction: Virtual Exchange at a Critical Juncture

For almost three decades, foreign language (FL) educators have been integrating online collaborative learning projects with international partner classes into their curricula (Warschauer, 1996). While this pedagogical practice has operated under various terminologies, including telecollaboration, Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL), and e-tandem, it appears that Virtual Exchange (VE) has emerged as the accepted umbrella term for describing the many different ways that learners can be engaged in online intercultural exchange projects as an integrated part of their studies and under the guidance of their teachers or expert facilitators (O'Dowd, 2023).

Despite being the domain of a small number of practitioners for much of its early trajectory (O'Dowd, 2011), VE has received much greater attention since the COVID-19 pandemic as this proved to be a reminder for many of the importance of further developing and improving the virtual element—not only of FL education but of international Higher Education in general (Sabzalieva et al., 2022). The successful inclusion of Blended Mobility (BM) as an important part of the current European Erasmus+ programme (2021-2027) has also demonstrated the important role that online collaborative learning can play as part of student mobility programmes.

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Many recent surveys of the state of play in international education confirm the high level of importance attributed to VE and BM as tools for introducing intercultural elements in FL programmes and for providing international learning experiences which complement long-term study abroad programmes. The 6th global survey report of the International Association of Universities (Marinoni & Pina Cardona, 2024) found that, in terms of virtual internationalisation, VE was the activity that had increased in importance at the highest percentage of Higher Education Institutions (HEI's) (80%), while the European University Association's (EUA) recent review of trends in European higher education reported that over 90% of European institutions viewed VE as valuable for students unable to pursue physical mobility and as a complement to traditional exchange programmes (Gaebel et al., 2025).

However, despite the increased interest and uptake, significant integration issues remain for VE. The aforementioned EUA study (2025) reports that, while universities recognise VE's potential, "[f]ormats, workload, organisational and legal issues are still causing problems" (Gaebel et al., p. 71). Perhaps more significantly, VE practitioners must also now contend with a dramatically evolved educational landscape. This new context is characterised by Global North-South collaboration, partnerships with classes in conflict zones, increasingly mobile and internationally experienced students (particularly in the Global North), and pedagogical frameworks that emphasise active global citizenship and engagement with transnational social issues. These shifts demand that practitioners move beyond established models of VE to address new questions of equity, ethics, and meaningful impact.

This article sets out to identify and examine the pedagogical and ethical challenges that emerge as VE expands into new contexts and partnerships. Through an analysis of six key areas of concern, I explore how the transformation from niche practice to mainstream educational tool has generated complex dilemmas around equity, communication, conflict engagement, political positioning, impact, and student motivation—and propose recommendations for practitioners navigating this evolving terrain.

An Evolving Field of Practice

The practice of VE in FL education has evolved spectacularly in recent years. The initial years of VE (commonly referred to at the time in FL education as telecollaboration) (1995-2015) were principally characterised by bilingual/bicultural exchanges between classes in the Global North (Belz, 2005; Kinginger et al., 1999; Warschauer, 1996). These telecollaborative projects generally paired students from two different *langua-cultures* (e.g. American students of Spanish working with Spanish students of English) to engage in structured online cross-cultural communication activities with the primary aims of developing students' FL skills and intercultural communicative competence through engagement with native speakers. This was usually achieved by the implementation of tasks which led learners to systematically compare and contrast cultural perspectives and jointly examine parallel texts, national media, and cultural practices. For example, Ryshina-Pankova (2018) reported on a German-American exchange where both groups read journalistic articles and watched movies on the topic of soccer patriotism and national identity in both countries before engaging in weekly online chats together based on the readings and their personal experiences of the topics.

However, recent years have seen a gradual shift away from an interpretation of intercultural learning which relies heavily on the study of a 'target country' and 'target culture' and which is characterised by a strong focus on localities, nationalities, and nation states (Risager, 2022; Römhild & Gaudelli, 2022). The issue of what constitutes a 'native speaker' or 'authentic' cultural representative in these contemporary online encounters has also been highlighted (Kern, 2014). Instead, there is a clear move towards approaches which look at the application of students' FL skills and intercultural competence for the development of global citizenship education and their engagement with transnational social issues and challenges. Gaudelli (2019) captures well the impetus behind this change of focus when he argues:

> [W]e teach youth to think like states, or nations, in a time when global problems demand thinking beyond borders. The absurdity of the disconnect is stark—that despite mounting problems that cross

> boundaries, including migration, global warming, infectious diseases, war—we continue to use the nation/state framework to solve problems that demand a different way of thinking. (np)

Against this backdrop, recent years have seen the emergence of a wide range of new VE partnerships and learning objectives in the field of FL education and beyond. These new learning initiatives include networks which bring together classrooms from the Global North and Global South (DeWinter & Klamer, 2021), the West with the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) region (Schumann & Moore, 2022), as well as partnerships involving classes located in conflict zones (O'Dowd, in press; Hellerstein et al., 2023). The goals of these projects go beyond the presentation and comparison of national and ethnic traditions and beliefs and instead focus on global goals and universal concerns such as peace building, ecological sustainability, and gender equality as reflected in the UN's Sustainable Development Goals and in models of global citizenship (Krengel, 2021). The projects are also generally characterised by the use of a lingua franca for online communication and by the inclusion of an active citizenship element where the projects aim to have an impact of the students' local or global societies. The involvement of local charities, NGOs, or businesses in collaboration with classes is also increasing common (Hauck, 2025).

Emerging Challenges for VE in the New Educational Landscape

These new applications and new contexts of VE inevitably bring with them a new series of questions and challenges which VE practitioners and HEI's have to deal with together. These are based on a review of the recent literature and my own experiences of working in the area for over 27 years. In the following sections I will look at each of these questions in turn and use examples from my own experiences and research to illustrate them:

1. How can we design VE projects that work equally well for all participants, rather than expecting those from the Global South to adapt to formats that favour Global North contexts?

2. How can FL educators support all participants to communicate effectively and confidently in VE, rather than creating formats that privilege native speakers or 'privileged' learners of dominant languages?

3. How can we design VE projects that benefit students in conflict zones while safeguarding international partners from the risk of secondary trauma when engaging with their peers' lived experiences of violence and conflict?

4. How can educators navigate the political and institutional pressures that arise when engaging students in VE with partners from conflict zones or politically sensitive regions?

5. How can we design VE projects that move beyond a tokenistic form of global citizenship to create genuine spaces for critical reflection on power structures and sustained engagement with complex global issues?

6. How can we design VE and BM projects that maintain genuine engagement and learning value for students who have already had extensive intercultural experiences or perceive online collaboration as less attractive than traditional physical mobility programmes?

Addressing Structural Inequalities in VE Design

Recent years have seen a plethora of reports and publications focusing on VEs between the Global North and Global South in Higher Education, as well as partnerships between western universities and classes in the MENA region. There are already numerous edited volumes dedicated to these emerging VE partnerships (Carloni et al., 2021; Gage, 2025; Satar, 2021) as well as many other publications which illustrate the heterogenic character of these new VE projects and partnerships. Guariento (2023), for example, describes a long-term collaboration between engineering students at the University of Glasgow and the Islamic University of Gaza, designed to address societal challenges through technological solutions while developing critical global awareness. The Stevens Initiative's annual report (2023) documents the Connected Classrooms programme, which has fostered VEs between institutions in Morocco, the United Arab Emirates, and the United States, reaching nearly 75,000 young people across

17 MENA countries and the USA. Breshears and du Plessis (2024) examine rural South African students' participation in VEs with American universities, demonstrating how such programmes can provide international learning opportunities to communities typically excluded from traditional study abroad programmes.

The benefits of these emerging global partnerships are numerous. First, these virtual formats can bring previously inaccessible cultures and geographical regions into classrooms that would remain out of reach through physical mobility due to cost prohibitions or security concerns (O'Dowd, 2023). Second, unlike traditional European-US online exchanges where participants often share similar educational systems and cultural frameworks, Global North-South partnerships expose students to fundamentally different ways of knowing, being, and problem-solving (Breshears & du Plessis, 2024).

These partnerships also provide universities with unique opportunities to engage their students in collaborative problem-solving of real-world problems. The Stevens Initiative's (2023) *Global Solutions Sustainability Challenge*, for example, demonstrates how MENA-US partnerships enable students to tackle complex issues like climate change and poverty from multiple perspectives, with participants noting that working across such significant cultural and economic differences fostered innovative approaches that neither group could have developed independently.

However, despite these advantages, VE practitioners in the Global North who engage in these projects with partners from other parts of the globe must be sure to keep in mind the need to design their collaborations in truly equitable and inclusive ways. Hauck (2025) warns us that VE "is not yet inherently inclusive. On the contrary, it is prone to Western hegemonies and power imbalances. .... Not all young people, for example, have equal access to a reliable internet connection or sufficient hardware to participate in VE" (p. 34). Stallivieri (2020), reporting on the Brazilian experience of participating in VE projects, describes 3 systemic barriers which are common to the Global South: The linguistic gap—most Brazilians speak only Portuguese; the digitalisation gap—lack of access to technology; and finally, the structural gap—the lack of institutional and curricular flexibility and support for such initiatives. In order to achieve greater equality in Global North-South exchanges, more partnerships from South America are exploring the integration of Spanish and Portuguese into their projects (Satar et al. 2024).

The following example of the problems that arose in a VE between Scandinavian and sub-Saharan students also illustrates well the technological gaps that can hinder equitable participation in global VE projects:

The Scandinavian students invest a lot of time making introductory videos for their partners in Africa and sharing them online. The videos are long, well-designed pieces of work. However, the Scandinavian students are frustrated when they still have not received feedback from their African partners about the videos after 2 weeks. When the teacher enquires, he is told that the African students do not have sufficient data on their phones to download the videos or to share their own videos and are waiting to have their data packs renewed on their devices.

A second important challenge to equity of exchange in VE is related to the positioning of the different partners within the design of the tasks or project. Helm (2024) explains this in the following way:

> Development work is rife with the 'white saviour complex' ... which can be easily reproduced in VE. It can occur, for example, in projects where the partners from the global north are positioned as experts tasked with identifying, analysing, and finding solutions to challenges in the global south. The partners in the global south are positioned as key informants and asked to provide information and/or data on the context but are not involved in identifying and analysing the challenges or in identifying possible solutions. (p. 48)

The following example of a VE between students in the Middle East and North American contexts illustrates this lack of equity in how partners care positioned in online collaborative projects:

International teams of Middle Eastern and North American engineering students work together to solve sustainability challenges and to develop green building designs for a Refugee Camp in the Middle Eastern country. The designs were judged by a panel of experts in a final competition. Middle Eastern students from the winning teams travelled to the North American university to meet their counterparts and learn about green buildings in that country.

Although this VE initiative demonstrates considerable potential for active citizenship engagement and socially relevant problem-solving, it nonetheless exemplifies an asymmetrical partnership structure. The pedagogical design inadvertently reinforces a binary positioning whereby one group of participants is constructed as beneficiaries requiring assistance, while their counterparts in the Global North are positioned as providers of expertise and solutions. This hierarchical framing is further reinforced through the reward structure, as one set of students receive travel opportunities to the Global North, thereby implicitly privileging one national context over another and potentially signalling differential valuations of the respective educational environments and knowledge systems.

In order to avoid this asymmetrical positioning of different partners in VE, Helm (2024) calls on educators to consider carefully the framing of challenges or problems to be addressed and the respective roles of participants: "Questions need to be raised such as who identified the challenge and who is finding solutions for whom, as well as the broader question of who and whose knowledges are being excluded from the challenge/solution" (p. 48). Helm's call is echoed by authors such as Kastler and Lewis (2021) and Hauck (2025) who highlight the importance of designing VEs which will serve all participating communities, rather than the community of the leading or funding partner.

Essentially, equity of engagement in VE means ensuring that all participants, regardless of their backgrounds, have opportunities to actively participate as equal partners in their online collaborations. This implies having access to the chosen tools but also dismantling hierarchical relationships where some participants are positioned merely as cultural informants or beneficiaries of intervention while others are positioned as researchers or experts. Instead, all participants should be recognised as co-constructors of knowledge with meaningful agency in shaping the project's direction, goals, and learning outcomes.

Achieving this vision requires educators to fundamentally rethink their approach to international collaboration. Rather than defaulting to conventional models that can perpetuate existing power imbalances between institutions and regions, VE practitioners must actively design frameworks that challenge and disrupt global hierarchies from the outset. This structural equity must be complemented by attention to the communicative dynamics within these partnerships, as technological access means little if participants cannot engage meaningfully in the collaborative process due to linguistic barriers and power imbalances in communication.

Linguistic Inclusion and Communication Equity

It was seen earlier that many of the initial VE models in FL education were characterised by bilingual communication using both partners' native languages. In e-tandem (O'Rourke, 2007), native speakers of different languages interact with equal time division between both languages, allowing each partner to practise their target language while providing authentic input. The Cultura model (Furstenberg et al., 2001) uses both languages differently, with both sets of students discussing materials in their first languages in order to express themselves clearly and provide their partners with examples of authentic language use.

In a systematic review of VE empirical studies carried out before 2015, only 6 of the 54 publications reported using a lingua franca as the language of communication in their projects (Lewis & O'Dowd, 2016). However, in recent years, more and more reports of VE initiatives have involved the use of a lingua franca. The advantages of using a lingua franca in VE are numerous. For example, it is easier for teachers of less spoken languages to find partners who would otherwise struggle to find classes for bilingual exchanges. It can also, in principle, provide a more balanced playing field where all partners are positioned as learners, as this quote from a Spanish student involved in a Spanish-Ukrainian exchange

illustrates: “I think I have felt more comfortable while talking in English that I would have if they had been native speakers. We had more or less the same level, so it has been an experience from both sides of the team.”

However, it is dangerous to assume that all students will have the ability to communicate equally in the lingua franca and that issues of hierarchy will be automatically avoided. The reality is that global VEs can bring students into contact that have varying levels in the lingua franca, and this can often be due to socioeconomic issues related to access to study and travel abroad. This can lead to stress, frustration and disappointment on behalf of learners in their VEs. The following example from a Spanish student's portfolio reflecting on her lingua franca exchange with Finnish, Dutch, and Polish partners illustrates this:

> During this meeting I had some trouble communicating, as I am not used to speaking English. But I tried to do my best. However, when I saw the excellent level of English that the other students had, I felt insecure and didn't speak too much. I also had a lot of trouble understanding them, as they spoke very fast and had very thick accents.

This language gap can be even more accentuated when connecting students from the global north and south. Helm (2024) warns:

> Even amongst those who have sufficient proficiency and access the exchanges, some may feel an asymmetric power dynamic and may be initially inhibited from speaking, particularly when there are highly proficient speakers in the group and when addressing particularly complex and/or emotional issues. (pp. 59-60)

In may not be within the gift of the VE teacher to solve this problem, but there are certain actions which educators can take in order to support students linguistically in their lingua franca interactions. These measures include providing students with dedicated in-class preparation time to plan and practise their contributions before VE meetings, supplying subject-specific vocabulary lists and expressions relevant to meeting topics, and creating structured task sheets for each weekly working group session that outline discussion topics and provide learners with a sense of security and organisation. It can also involve designing VE formats that strategically combine both synchronous videoconferencing and asynchronous text-based communication through emails or discussion forums, thereby allowing students time to draft and refine their messages while also enabling teachers to provide ongoing feedback and support throughout the collaborative process.

Apart from these scaffolding techniques, Hauck (2025) also proposes the integration of translanguaging practices, understood here as the use of multiple linguistic and semiotic resources as a single repertoire, in VE in order to support students in their online communication and argues that this practice can encourage learners to use their full linguistic and semiotic repertoire to help them realise their multimodal communication potential. A further form of linguistic support may come in the form of emerging technologies such as AI and automatic translation. Such tools can allow students to use subtitling during videoconferences and to receive written summaries or transcripts of online meetings which can be read at the learners' pace.

While technological solutions and pedagogical scaffolding can help address some linguistic challenges in VE, the fundamental issue of communication equity reveals deeper questions about whose voices are heard and valued in international collaboration. These linguistic power dynamics become even more complex when VE partnerships involve regions experiencing conflict, where the stakes of communication—and miscommunication—extend far beyond academic learning to encompass trauma, political sensitivity, and the ethical responsibilities of FL educators who choose to engage their students with such contexts.

Supporting Conflict Zone Engagement

Many authors have drawn attention to the many links between FL education with peacebuilding and conflict transformation. This is because the skills of intercultural dialogue and the related attitudes of

empathy, curiosity and openness can lend themselves to conflict negotiation. Rothman and Sanderson (2018), for example, argue that the integration of peace education with global issues and language education is "a natural fit" (p. 71) as FL education leads students to engage with critical thinking, self-reflection, and develop awareness of 'the other'. Heleta and Deardorff (2017) propose the integration of 'conflict competencies' (i.e. the ability to navigate through conflict) and 'reconciliation competencies' into approaches to intercultural competence development. These skill sets are also prominent in models of global competence and global citizenship used extensively in FL educational programmes. Various frameworks such as the Council of Europe's democratic citizenship model, UNESCO's Global Citizenship Education, and the OECD's Global Competence Framework include conflict resolution skills as core competencies (Council of Europe, 2018; OECD, 2018; UNESCO, 2014).

Against this background, a growing number of practitioners in Europe and the US are employing VE to engage their students in communication with classes located in contexts of conflict such as Ukraine (Fortanet-Gómez & Drobotun, 2025; Lavrysh, 2024), Israel and Palestine (Hellerstein et al., 2023), and Afghanistan (Dietrich, 2022). Educators see its value for raising students' awareness of the conflict in question, for developing skills in conflict management and resolution, and also, in some cases, as a form of solidarity with students and teachers suffering the effects of the conflict. The benefits of these VEs go both ways as well. O'Dowd (in press) found that VE enables conflict-zone students to share lived experiences with international peers, counter misconceptions while also providing a platform for trauma processing and enabling students to maintain academic continuity during conflict periods.

However, two distinct pedagogical challenges emerge for teachers outside of conflict zones when considering engaging their students in online collaborative exchange with students studying in contexts of war and conflict. The first of these is related to the risk of trauma to partner students outside of the conflict. In interviews carried out with VE practitioners from conflict zones, various informants mentioned the possibility that students from conflict zones may inadvertently traumatise their international partners during VEs. One Ukrainian teacher reported that their international partners "weren't ready to learn about such an extreme environment," while another teacher explained

> [w]hat I am afraid of is that our students can traumatise those students [the partner class from outside of the conflict] because they are not supposed to be in this difficult situation, and for them it's sometimes difficult to live with this, you know. .... So they become like a witness of something horrible and very close and sometimes they don't know how to react. And it might be a problem.

Informants explained that this had led their students to consciously moderate their language to avoid traumatising partners from peaceful countries, and some teachers recommended implementing protective protocols requiring mutual consent before sharing conflict-related content. The challenge for educators clearly lies in balancing the therapeutic benefits for conflict-zone students—who find healing in sharing their experiences—with the psychological well-being of partners from outside the zone of conflict who may become unwilling witnesses to trauma they are unprepared to process.

Lavrysh (2024) proposes the RAFT framework (Resilience, Appreciation of Diversity, Facilitation, and Trauma-Informed pedagogy) as essential competencies for educators managing VE with students from conflict zones. Her key recommendations include implementing trauma-informed practices such as creating safe environments, using alternative assessments (e.g., peer feedback, portfolios), providing emotional support resources, and developing backup plans for crisis interruptions. She argues that traditional VE competencies are insufficient for crisis contexts and that educators need specialised training in trauma-sensitive pedagogy, stress management, and inclusive design to effectively support both sets of students in these exchanges.

A second issue which educators must contend with is whether teachers have the 'right' to engage their students in such online collaborations. Byram et al. (2025) mention some of the professional and ethical questions which confront teachers when they consider engaging their students in action outside of the classroom:

> [T]here is the question of whether it is right or wrong to ask students to engage in social action... Another issue is whether teachers should avoid imposing their own views about what participation and social responsibility should mean in practice. Should the students be exposed to potentially risky and controversial situations, and if so, how the risks are managed. (p. 8)

There are many authors who believe that engaging students in social action outside the classroom should be an important part of modern FL education. Olivero (2023) reports that there is a widely held conviction that language education should serve as a means to promote equity, inclusion, and diversity while Ennser-Kananen (2016) laments that despite an evolution in how culture is approached in FL education,

> we don't get our hands too dirty. We don't habitually engage in conversations about past and present displacement and devastation that continue to happen locally and globally. We don't usually listen to stories of escaping war and finding refuge as well as racism in a new land, despite the fact that these events occur in settings where so many of the languages taught in classrooms around the world are spoken. (p. 557)

There are various arguments put forward in favour of this approach. First, well-known frameworks to global competence and intercultural citizenship come with explicit values which need to be attended to in classrooms. For example, the Council of Europe's *Reference Framework for Competences of Democratic Culture* (2018) includes a list of values such as valuing human dignity and human rights, valuing cultural diversity, valuing democracy, justice, fairness, equality, and the rule of law. If teachers and institutions take on these values and see them as a part of their pedagogical goals, then carrying out VE with classes in conflict zones or in 'difficult contexts' (Porto, 2025) can be an effective and justifiable way to focus on them.

In the case that FL educators do not see themselves as being responsible for the transmission of particular values, it can be argued that they should at least be engaged with the development of students' critical cultural awareness—the ability to evaluate, critically and on the basis of explicit criteria, perspectives, practices, and products in one's own and other cultures and countries (Byram et al., 2025, p. 8). By engaging with groups from other countries who may be located in zones of conflict or living in countries operating under different value systems to our own does not necessarily imply agreement or complicity with these worldviews. Rather, it gives students the opportunity to encounter, compare, and critique both their own and their partners' value systems in a context of safety and respect and under the guidance of educators. In this regard, Byram (2021) insists that "values pluralism is not relativism" (p. 75), meaning that being open to the variability of values and their origins does not necessarily imply our acceptance of their moral validity.

Although not focussing on the particular activity of VE with zones of conflict, authors (Byram et al., 2025; Ennser-Kananen, 2016; Porto, 2025) have provided numerous relevant recommendations when engaging in activities which bring students outside of the classroom and into contexts which may involve contact with conflict, politics, or sensitive social issues. First, teachers should communicate openly with all stakeholders, including with their students who should be active participants and decision-makers in the process. Second, educators should directly address controversial topics involving trauma and difficult emotions rather than avoiding them through meaningful pedagogical approaches—such as those recommended by Lavrysh (2024) and put into practice by the *Soliya Connect* programme. Finally, educators can use frameworks such as "Courageous Conversations" (Ennser-Kananen, 2016) to help students explore controversial perspectives, express difficult emotions, monitor their understanding, and engage in meaningful activism. The overarching message is that ethical teaching in intercultural citizenship requires deliberate planning, transparent communication, institutional support, and a commitment to developing students' critical thinking abilities rather than simply imposing particular values.

Navigating Political and Institutional Pressures in Conflict Zone Engagement

A separate issue which arises in this context of engaging in VE with classes in zones of conflict is that FL educators need to consider the professional and legal implications of their work and to be aware of the manner in which VE with conflict zones can force them, their institutions and their students to position themselves in global political issues.

Current conflicts such as those in Eastern Europe, East Asia, and the Middle East have led to intense debate, tension, and protests on campuses across the globe and have often forced institutions of Higher Education to take a stance on academic collaboration with the countries in question (de Wit & Altbach, 2024). In this context, the choice of partners for online international collaboration projects can also become a political act. Engaging students in online collaboration with students from a particular cultural group or country can risk teachers clashing with their own institutions' policies or experiencing ostracization from colleagues and students within their institution. An example of this comes from a colleague in the British Isles who sent me the following email some years ago during our VE which involved a university from the Middle East:

> Some of my colleagues in English made an official complaint to the Head of Department because we engaged with a project involving [country in the Middle East]—even if it was optional and only 10 students took part in it. Our institution does not have an official position on engagement with [country in the Middle East], but I think you should know that it happened.

Interview data from O'Dowd's (in press) study of FL teachers from conflict zones reveal that they often struggle to find partner classes because of the reluctance of their international colleagues from the Global North to engage their students in collaboration with partners from that particular country or region. One teacher lamented that "[m]y students and I had already faced repeated exclusion and prejudice in VE over the years, and now it was actually trendy to do so," while a VE practitioner from another country explained: "Finding a partner was also difficult for us in the initial stages. We sent emails to about 40 university teachers; some expressed interest but withdrew shortly after, leaving only the one who knew us to help launch the VE."

Engaging our students in active global citizenship through online engagement with partners in different political contexts can bring with it a series of challenges and raises a set of ethical questions that FL educators may not be familiar with in the traditional FL classroom. That said, if VE practitioners and educational institutions are serious about promoting global citizenship in their classrooms, these may be challenges that need to be confronted, otherwise they risk limiting their work to well-meaning superficial activities which allows both teachers and students to continue in their comfort zones. Andreotti (2006) differentiates between soft and critical approaches to global citizenship: Soft global citizenship education approaches global issues through charity and moral obligation, seeking to help develop or save others based on predetermined Western solutions and assumptions. However, critical global citizenship education focuses on examining power structures and one's own complicity in global inequalities, emphasising justice, accountability, and learning from rather than imposing upon others. Applying this principle to the context of VE, Hauck and Helm (2020) identify the characteristics of hegemonic forms of VE which include 'surfing' diversity to establish a pleasant environment, seeking compromises for the sake of completing collaborative tasks, masking or ignoring power imbalances to focus on universal values, and finally, assuming global north perspectives.

Providing clear guidelines for teachers to deal with these challenges is impossible. Before taking a decision to engage with a class in a particular country or political context, educators will have to consider the policies of their home institution, their own political and ethical beliefs and, very importantly, the beliefs of their students which may not coincide with that of their teacher and which may lead them to question their participation in an exchange due to moral or political principles. The decision to engage students in VE with conflict zones represents perhaps the most complex challenge facing contemporary VE practitioners, requiring them to balance educational goals with ethical responsibilities, therapeutic

benefits with trauma risks, and academic freedom with institutional policies. While such partnerships can provide powerful opportunities for critical global citizenship development, they also lead to fundamental questions about the actual impact and consequences of VE initiatives. This leads us to examine whether VE can deliver on its promises of meaningful global engagement or whether it risks becoming a form of educational voyeurism that satisfies participants' desire for international experience without creating genuine change.

The Limitations of Impact

Increasingly, university students are being trained to actively engage with the issues and challenges of the outside world. Leask (2015) talks about preparing students to be global citizens and developing their "capacity to critique the world they live, see problems and issues from a range of perspectives, and take action to address them" (p. 17, emphasis in original). Similarly, the UNESCO (2014) underlines the importance of empowering "learners to engage and assume active roles, both locally and globally, to face and resolve global challenges and ultimately to become proactive contributors to a more just, peaceful, tolerant, inclusive, secure and sustainable world" (p. 14).

But to what extent can FL education and VE genuinely enable students to effect meaningful change within their local or global communities? Whilst VE programmes may aspire to contribute to the transformation of participants' political or economic circumstances, there remains the troubling possibility that such initiatives represent little more than well-meaning educational voyeurism—affording students in the Global North the opportunity to observe poverty, conflict, and alternative political systems from the safety of their classrooms and homes, without generating substantive impact or lasting change. This concern reflects arguments made by scholars such as Stein and Andreotti (2021) who have challenged mainstream interpretations of Global Citizenship Education for failing to address the underlying economic and cultural systems that perpetuate global inequalities in the distribution of power, wealth, and labour.

VE practitioners have provided varying responses to these concerns. Dietrich (2022), for instance, facilitated engagement between graduate students pursuing Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) qualifications and adult English language learners in Afghanistan through synchronous online tutoring sessions. She identified clear value in the partnership and determined that:

> through VE with participants in conflict countries, future teachers can gain invaluable professional experience needed to support students who live in places where they do not feel safe, students who have been forced to leave their homes, and students who have witnessed or experienced violence themselves." (p. 23)

Calamita and Trapè (2020) also demonstrated the potential for meaningful impact through online international collaboration between students in the US and Italy. Their project's collaborative research on gender equality successfully led to campaigns that persuaded local town councils to name new streets after prominent local women.

Others, however, are less convinced about VE's impact. Guariento (2023) questions the impact of his Scotland-Gaza engineering collaboration on the lives of the participants, noting participant reflections that such initiatives may prove "tokenistic" (p. 107) and warns that "the emancipatory effects of online interaction should not be overstated (particularly in the Gaza Strip)" (p. 110). Similarly, Glimäng (2022), reporting on her transnational VE about sustainability, warns that linking real-world issues to VE does not automatically ensure critical intercultural work. Her VE study found students avoided controversial topics due to time constraints and linguistic obstacles, and she questions whether action-oriented pedagogical tasks might be "promoting sloganising and the illusion of acting" (p. 76) rather than ensuring genuine critical understanding. To counter this, she advocates embedding reflexivity more explicitly within VE project design, arguing that VE projects are intensive and time-consuming yet frequently conclude abruptly once collaborative assignments are finished, often accompanied only by cursory project assessments.

This question of VE's real-world impact reveals a sobering reality for FL educators. While these programmes may successfully develop participants' intercultural competence and global awareness, their capacity to effect meaningful change in the communities they engage with often remains limited and contested. This disconnect between educational goals and tangible outcomes becomes particularly problematic as VE programmes increasingly target students who have already gained international experience through traditional mobility programmes or multicultural environments. For such students, the challenge is not introducing them to cultural difference, but rather providing sufficiently sophisticated and challenging experiences that justify their investment in virtual collaboration over other international opportunities.

Sustaining Student Motivation and Engagement

As VE and BM programmes have matured and expanded, FL educators often face an unexpected paradox—the very success of international education initiatives has begun to diminish their perceived value among students. The contemporary educational landscape—particularly in the Global North—presents a reality where the once-novel prospect of international collaboration now competes with students' increasingly globalised experiences and expectations as well as with their high expectations of good quality online learning.

This motivational decline stems from several interconnected factors that reflect the transformed educational environment. Students in the Global North now increasingly inhabit a world where international mobility opportunities have proliferated, online communication has become ubiquitous, and multicultural societies have rendered intercultural contact commonplace rather than exceptional. For many, VE no longer represents the gateway to international experience it once promised to be. The VALIANT project (O'Dowd & Vinagre, 2024) captured this sentiment through student voices that reveal the challenges facing educators. Various students in the study with previous international exposure reported a limited learning impact of their VE projects: One student reported "I was an Erasmus student, I learned a lot about different cultures, so this is not really new to me." Others, coming from multicultural environments, observed that "I was used to being friends with people from different cultures before, so it was familiar territory." Perhaps most tellingly, students with prior VE experience note that "[a]s it's not my first VE, I can't say this has had that big an impact."

This motivational challenge is particularly evident in BM programmes, where differing student roles can create barriers to engagement. The Erasmus+ Blended Intensive Programmes (BIPs) has allowed educators across the European Union to combine online intercultural collaboration between 3 or more universities with short-term physical mobility to one of the partner institutions' locations (O'Dowd & Werner, 2024). However, these programmes create an inherent imbalance: mobile students receive funding and enjoy travel opportunities, while domestic students at the host institution often find themselves relegated to hosting roles without corresponding incentives or rewards. This structural inequality inevitably affects the motivation and experience of students who remain at home, raising questions about how BM can provide meaningful value to all participants rather than primarily benefiting those who travel.

In their survey of students who had participated in blended mobility initiatives, the HIBLend project (Psychogyiou, et al., 2025) identified this as a major weakness in BM programmes. To counteract this, the main recommendation of the students was to make the online component more attractive and to offer them a similar short exchange during another semester (p. 16). This inequality in BM can be seen in some student reflections from my own BIP, which was hosted in my home institution in Spain and which brought together students from Germany, Italy, Finland, and Lithuania with the local Spanish participants. One Spanish student articulated the frustration felt by many domestic participants:

> All the Spanish students agree that it is not fair for us to stay in León while the other countries get to travel abroad. .... I would have loved to have as a final destination a different country from the ones collaborating in the exchange so that we were all on equal terms.

These findings underscore fundamental challenges confronting the fields of VE and BM. First, how can VE remain compelling and transformative for students who have already traversed cultural boundaries, whether through previous mobility experiences, multicultural upbringings, or prior online collaborations? And second, how can BM programmes motivate students who are not physically mobile during the project? The answers to these questions probably lie in a reimagining of what online collaborative learning can offer—moving beyond superficial cultural encounters towards deeper, more sophisticated forms of intercultural engagement that can challenge even the most internationally experienced students and compensate those who will not be travelling during their BM.

Conclusion

This article has examined six critical challenges that contemporary VE and BM practitioners must navigate as the field evolves beyond its initial models toward more complex global partnerships and engages with more complex global issues and challenges. Through analysis of structural inequalities in VE design, linguistic inclusion and communication equity, conflict zone engagement, limitations of real-world impact, and sustaining student motivation, I have sought to identify how the expansion and maturation of VE has generated new pedagogical dilemmas that require thoughtful, evidence-based responses. These challenges reflect VE's transition from a niche practice to a mainstream educational tool within FL education which requires more sophisticated approaches that can address power imbalances, support diverse communication needs, engage with sensitive global issues, and maintain relevance for increasingly internationally experienced student populations.

Based on this analysis of the evolving challenges within VE and BM, I propose five basic recommendations for FL practitioners seeking to develop more equitable, effective, and engaging programmes. First, educators should implement equity-centred design principles that move beyond tokenistic inclusion toward truly equitable partnership models, carefully examining who identifies challenges, provides solutions, and whose knowledge systems are privileged within collaborative structures. Second, comprehensive linguistic support practices are essential. Educators must recognise that lingua franca communication does not automatically create a level playing field and therefore requires robust scaffolding mechanisms. Third, when engaging with conflict zones or about sensitive global issues, practitioners should consider adopting trauma-informed and politically conscious approaches that implement protective protocols and provide emotional support resources. Fourth, when planning a VE and BM programme, educators should differentiate clearly between tokenistic and genuine active citizenship. Finally, as student populations become increasingly internationally experienced, educators need to design sophisticated online engagement models that evolve beyond basic intercultural encounters toward intellectually enriching and challenging interactions that will be of value to all students—including those that are coming to the project with previous intercultural experiences.

The field of VE stands at a critical juncture where practitioners must grapple with increasingly complex pedagogical and ethical challenges. While the recommendations outlined here offer potential pathways forward, they represent starting points for ongoing dialogue rather than definitive solutions. The evolution of VE will require continued experimentation, critical reflection, and adaptation as educators work to navigate the tensions between educational aspirations and global realities in an increasingly interconnected yet unequal world.

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