

Keynote Lecture:

Engaging with teachers and students in zones of conflict: Virtual Exchange as a tool for peace building and global citizenship

In today's world of intensifying geopolitical tensions, foreign language education is evolving beyond a focus on linguistic competence development to cultivate global citizenship. This presentation examines how Virtual Exchange (VE) serves as a transformative pedagogical approach in conflict-affected regions, developing critical conflict transformation and peace-building skills recognized in major educational frameworks by the Council of Europe, UNESCO, and the OECD.

Based on qualitative research across five conflict-affected countries, this study investigates how online intercultural dialogue provides educational continuity, psychological support, and global citizenship development when conventional education is disrupted by violence. Findings reveal that VE offers students in conflict zones unique opportunities to share their experiences internationally, process trauma through dialogue, and maintain educational normalcy amid instability. However, implementation faces challenges including technical barriers from damaged infrastructure, heightened emotional sensitivities, and ethical concerns regarding potential re-traumatization.

The presentation proposes a trauma-informed VE framework specifically designed for conflict settings featuring: (1) thorough contextual preparation; (2) systematic trust-building processes; (3) carefully sequenced topic progression; (4) flexible participation accommodating conflict-related disruptions; and (5) teacher collaboration prioritizing student wellbeing. This framework transforms VE from mere knowledge exchange into education fostering action-oriented and empathic learning approaches.

At a time when polarisation threatens collective action on global challenges, VE in conflict zones demonstrates how foreign language education creates spaces for meaningful cross-divide dialogue. The presentation concludes with practical guidelines for educators implementing VE with partner classes in conflict regions, balancing emotional safety with academic rigor while developing intercultural competencies essential for sustainable coexistence in our interconnected yet divided world.