

Research paper

## The “Voices Beyond Borders” English-Mediated Intercultural Educational Solidarity Project with Gaza: A Reflective Case Study

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### ABSTRACT

Education in Gaza has been profoundly disrupted by ongoing war, displacement, and the widespread destruction of educational infrastructure. In this context, small-scale educational initiatives can create modest but meaningful spaces for learning, connection, and psychosocial support. We present *Voices Beyond Borders* (VBB), an English-mediated virtual exchange project linking young women in Gaza with Chinese EFL teachers studying for an MA TESOL degree in the UK, as a reflective qualitative case study. We explore how VBB created opportunities for intercultural dialogue, voice, relationship-building, and educational solidarity amid severe educational disruption. We draw on participant and team reflections, project artefacts, Padlet posts, and final video outputs. Findings suggest that VBB enabled participants to move beyond distant representations of Gaza towards more direct human connection; supported Gazan participants in using English as a resource for voice, agency, and storytelling; fostered reciprocal forms of educational solidarity; and created learning through difficulty, difference, and ethical listening. We suggest that VBB's value lay less in measurable language outcomes than in the relational, ethical, and psychosocial possibilities it opened. While VBB could not address the structural destruction of education in Gaza, it illustrates how internationally supported, locally facilitated, and ethically grounded virtual exchange can contribute to intercultural educational solidarity in and with Gaza.

**Keywords:** education in emergencies, educational solidarity, English as a lingua franca, Gaza; intercultural dialogue, trauma-informed pedagogy, virtual exchange

On 5 October 2023, three educators - two in Gaza and one in the UK - met online to discuss a proposed project on Palestinian women's oral traditions. The project aimed to document, celebrate, and reimagine these traditions in ways that would strengthen cultural pride and foster intercultural understanding among young Palestinians. Two days later, the long-standing conflict dramatically escalated. The revised proposal was never completed, and two months later one of the Gaza-based colleagues involved in the discussion was killed in an Israeli military strike. In the weeks and months that followed, earlier plans for cultural and intercultural education were overtaken by the immediate realities of survival in Gaza and by the search for meaningful forms of educational solidarity from beyond Gaza.

Over time, the determination to work together re-emerged, but the focus shifted. Rather than developing a project centred on cultural heritage, the team began to explore how a small educational initiative might respond to the disruption of learning opportunities for young people in Gaza. The *Voices Beyond Borders* (VBB) project developed from this renewed commitment. It built on long-standing relationships between educators in Gaza and

the UK, local facilitation through Senabil Association for Youth and Development, and support from colleagues connected to the TESOL community at The University of Manchester (UK).

VBB became an English-mediated virtual exchange linking young women in Gaza with a mostly female group of Chinese EFL teachers studying for an MA TESOL degree in the UK. English was not treated simply as an academic subject or future study skill, but as a shared communicative resource through which participants could engage in dialogue, develop relationships, and learn with and from one another across profoundly different lived realities. Through paired online exchanges, Padlet posts, and final video outputs, participants explored aspects of everyday life, learning, culture, aspirations, and the experience of studying during war.

In this article, we present VBB as a reflective qualitative case study of a small-scale intercultural educational initiative developed during severe educational disruption in Gaza. We outline the project's context, conceptual foundations, design, implementation, and participant reflections, and consider what VBB suggests about the possibilities and limits of internationally supported, locally facilitated, and ethically grounded virtual exchange in and with Gaza.

## **BACKGROUND**

### **Team collaboration and informed perspectives**

The VBB project brought together young people from markedly different linguistic, cultural and lived experiences through online communication in English against the ceaseless thrum of conflict and its geopolitical reverberations. Designing such an initiative required more than pedagogical expertise; it required a team capable of drawing on diverse disciplinary perspectives while remaining critically aware of the ethical implications of educational work in contexts of conflict.

Our team has strong roots in the TESOL specialism within the Manchester Institute of Education at The University of Manchester (UK). All members of the team are alumni of this specialism and department. In different ways, we have all encountered critiques of English language education through lenses such as *linguicide*, understood as the displacement or erasure of languages through the dominance of more powerful languages (Phillipson & Skutnabb-Kangas, 2017); *epistemicide*, the marginalisation or destruction of local and indigenous knowledge systems (MacKenzie, 2017); *colonialism*, the reproduction of colonial power relations through language education (Meighan, 2023); and *native-speakerism*, the privileging of idealised native-speaker norms and identities (Holliday, 2006). These critiques caution against the uncritical promotion of English and highlight the need to consider carefully how, why, and for what purposes English is used in educational settings, especially when such settings are shaped by unequal histories, conflict, and displacement.

At the same time, we recognised the potential of English as a *lingua franca* to create opportunities for communication, dialogue, and educational solidarity across linguistic and cultural boundaries (Baker, 2016). English, in this sense, could open a space for relationships to develop among people who would otherwise be separated by geography, conflict, and language. Such relationships are central to solidarity education, since, as Gaztambide-Fernández et al. (2022, p. 254) argue, 'no one is in solidarity alone'. This educational stance informed the initial thinking behind the VBB project and later shaped its conceptual framework.

The diversity of the team's expertise shaped both the conceptual framing and the practical implementation of the project. The team also brought relevant contextual understandings of Gaza and Palestine more generally, China and the status of Gaza in public discussion, and Manchester's TESOL department and the profile of its MA students. In addition, the team brought experience and expertise in English language education, including English as a *lingua franca* and intercultural communication (Fay et al., 2016; Tantiniranat & Fay, 2018; Wang et al., 2025); refugee language education (Holmes, Fay & Andrews, 2019; Polymenakou & Fay, 2022); language education and resilience in a time of conflict (El Masry, 2025; 2026); language teacher education in challenging contexts (Motteram & Dawson, 2019; Motteram et al., 2020); global mental health and trauma-informed methodology (Samara, 2025; White et al., 2022); and online education and computer-mediated intercultural communication through English as a *lingua franca* (Trejo Vences & Fay, 2015).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> We include these publications not to aggrandise ourselves but rather to substantiate our claim to be collectively invested in a complicated and interconnected set of areas of experience and expertise, a necessary investment for a project such as VBB which involves humanitarian education in a time of conflict, and 'making a difference' despite all that has been written and said about the causes, rights and wrongs, narratives and counter-narratives, and competing characterisations of this conflict. We needed to be experienced and well-versed in these many areas if we were to have any hope of navigating these complexities and delivering on our aspiration 'to make a difference'.

## The educational situation in Gaza

Since 7 October 2023, in a dramatic escalation of the conflict-shaped situation of previous years, all aspects of daily life in Gaza have been very severely affected. Education has been among the sectors most devastated by the war. Recent UNICEF assessments indicate that nearly 98 percent of school buildings have sustained damage, with over 93 percent requiring major rehabilitation or complete reconstruction before education can fully resume (UNICEF State of Palestine, 2026). As a consequence, around 420,000 children remained without access to face-to-face learning during the period in which VBB was being developed and implemented, while more than 625,000 students and nearly 23,000 teachers had been affected by attacks on education and prolonged school closures.

The widespread destruction of educational institutions in Gaza has been discussed in recent scholarship through the concept of scholasticide, understood here as the systematic destruction of educational systems, institutions, and knowledge production. The term was attributed to Karma Nabulsi in Ahmad and Vulliamy's 2009 report and has more recently been applied to the current context in Gaza (Desai et al., 2025). In this sense, the damage to education in Gaza is not only infrastructural. It also threatens children's learning trajectories, psychosocial wellbeing, future aspirations, and access to forms of knowledge, mobility, and connection that education makes possible.

Taken together, such conditions point to the near collapse of Gaza's education system and the extraordinary pressure facing communities striving to sustain it. Yet, despite these conditions and the collective trauma accumulated over years of conflict, local organisations, educators, families, and communities across Gaza developed a range of grassroots educational initiatives to sustain learning and preserve educational continuity while formal schooling remained largely inaccessible. This determination reflects Hammond's (2012, p. 82) observation about an earlier era, which also applies now: "Palestinians reject the closing-down nature of occupation because education is always about opening up the future". These responses included community-led initiatives (CLIs), temporary learning spaces (TLSs) across displacement camps and residential neighbourhoods, and online or hybrid educational initiatives that sought to maintain learning, connection, and hope under conditions of extreme disruption. These include English Language Teaching (ELT) programmes designed to help Palestinian students develop their English language skills to gain access to broader educational and professional opportunities within and beyond Gaza (Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge and Centre for Lebanese Studies, 2026; Palanac, 2026).

The VBB project emerged within this broader landscape of community-led initiatives, but it was not designed simply as another temporary learning activity. Developed in collaboration with educators working through Senabil Association for Youth and Development, a humanitarian and development organisation supporting crisis-affected communities, the project responded to a more specific need: the educational and emotional isolation of young women in Gaza, and their desire for meaningful learning opportunities that connected them with peers beyond Gaza. Through English as a shared medium of communication, VBB sought to create a space for learning, intercultural dialogue, and relationship-building. In doing so, it aimed to foster educational solidarity that extended beyond language learning alone.

## CONCEPTUAL AND PEDAGOGICAL FOUNDATIONS

The VBB project was informed by educational, intercultural, and ethical perspectives, including intercultural dialogue, English as a lingua franca, educational solidarity, and trauma-informed pedagogy. Together, these perspectives shaped the project's aims, design, and implementation.

### Intercultural dialogue through English as a lingua franca

The VBB project was grounded in an understanding of intercultural dialogue as a process of building relationships, developing mutual understanding, and co-constructing meaning across cultural differences rather than simply exchanging information. From this perspective, dialogue is characterised by reciprocity, openness, and shared learning, enabling participants to engage with different perspectives while reflecting critically on their own assumptions (Baker, 2016).

Within this pedagogical approach, English was understood not simply as the target language of instruction but as a shared means of communication. Drawing on the concept of English as a lingua franca (ELF), we viewed English as a resource that enables communication among speakers from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds rather than as a language measured against native-speaker norms (Seidlhofer, 2011). This perspective shifts the emphasis from linguistic accuracy alone towards successful communication, negotiation of meaning, and the development of intercultural understanding beyond war, destruction, and educational erasure.

This understanding also draws on Holliday's (1999) distinction between large cultures and small cultures. Rather than assuming that communication occurs primarily between representatives of national cultures, Holliday argues

that participants continuously construct new ‘small cultures’ through interaction. These emerge as individuals negotiate shared meanings, relationships, and ways of working together within particular contexts. This perspective was particularly relevant to VBB, which sought to create opportunities for participants to engage with one another as individuals rather than as representatives of fixed cultural identities.

### **Educational solidarity as an ethical orientation**

While intercultural dialogue and English as a lingua franca explain how communication across linguistic, cultural, and lived differences became possible in VBB, educational solidarity helps explain why such communication mattered. We understood dialogue through English as part of a broader commitment to educational solidarity: a relational approach to education in which learning is shaped by reciprocity, ethical responsibility, and shared commitment across unequal circumstances (Bajaj & Tow 2021; Gaztambide-Fernández, 2012;). It differs from charity or one-way support because it does not position some participants as helpers and others as passive recipients. Instead, it treats education as a space where people can listen to one another, recognise each other’s realities, and participate in the shared work of sustaining learning, dignity, and possibility.

In this sense, educational solidarity gave intercultural dialogue an ethical purpose. VBB did not seek simply to improve participants’ English or expose them to another culture, but to create a carefully facilitated educational encounter in which participants could learn with and from one another. Such encounters can help sustain education not only by supporting language development, but also by reopening spaces of connection, imagination, and hope at a time when war, isolation, and disrupted schooling threaten to close down young people’s sense of future.

In Gaza, where education has been violently disrupted, this perspective is particularly relevant because it frames connection, dialogue, and shared learning not as supplementary activities, but as meaningful educational responses to isolation and erasure. Badwan et al. (2026) discussion of rethinking education in/with Gaza strengthens this understanding by arguing for a new educational lexicon oriented towards justice, with-ness, and solidarity. Their shift from intercultural education towards solidarity education is especially helpful here: it suggests that education with Gaza cannot be reduced to cross-cultural exchange, but must involve ethical responsiveness to dehumanisation, a refusal of erasure, and a commitment to imagining educational futures. While intercultural dialogue, English as a lingua franca, and educational solidarity provided the rationale for bringing participants together, the realities of learning during ongoing conflict required equal attention to participants’ wellbeing and the conditions necessary for meaningful engagement.

### **Trauma-informed pedagogy in education in emergencies**

Education in emergencies (EiE) recognises that, in contexts of armed conflict and protracted crises, education serves purposes that extend beyond academic learning. Alongside supporting learning continuity, it contributes to protection, psychosocial wellbeing, and the restoration of stability and routine. In settings such as Gaza, where war has disrupted not only schooling but also children’s daily lives, educational responses increasingly seek to address learning and wellbeing as interconnected priorities rather than separate concerns (INEE, 2024; Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge, Centre for Lebanese Studies and UNRWA, 2026; Menth & Al-Madi, 2025).

Trauma-informed pedagogy complements this perspective by recognising that experiences of conflict, displacement, and loss shape how learners engage with education. Rather than focusing solely on academic recovery, it acknowledges that meaningful learning depends on creating environments in which learners feel psychologically safe, respected, and able to participate without fear of further harm. In this way, trauma-informed pedagogy strengthens the educational aims of EiE by placing relationships, trust, and learner agency alongside learning itself (Carello & Butler, 2015; Brunzell et al., 2016).

Among the available trauma-informed frameworks, we drew on the approach developed by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA, 2014). Its six guiding principles - safety; trustworthiness and transparency; peer support; collaboration and mutuality; empowerment, voice and choice; and attention to cultural, historical, and gender issues - translate trauma-informed values into practical considerations for educational design. These principles therefore provided an appropriate framework for planning an intercultural educational initiative within a context of ongoing conflict. The following section explains how they were operationalised throughout the project.

### **Operationalising trauma-informed principles**

The six principles proposed by SAMHSA (2014) provided more than a general ethical framework for VBB; they informed practical decisions concerning the design of learning activities, participant interaction, and facilitation. Rather than applying the framework as a fixed set of procedures, we interpreted these principles in ways that responded to the realities of intercultural learning during ongoing conflict.

The principles of safety and trustworthiness and transparency emphasise learning environments in which participants feel psychologically secure, respected, and able to engage with confidence (SAMHSA, 2014). In VBB, participation remained voluntary throughout, expectations and activities were communicated clearly, and participants were free to decide the extent to which they wished to share personal experiences. The emphasis was not on recounting traumatic events, but on creating an educational space in which dialogue could develop gradually and without pressure.

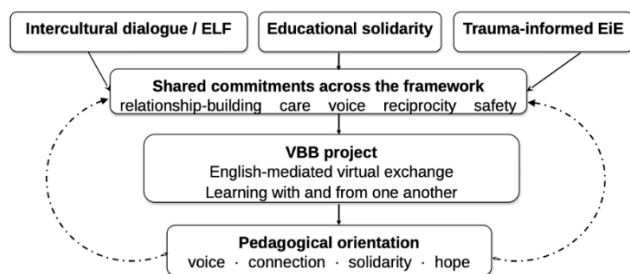
The principles of peer support, and collaboration and mutuality recognise that learning is strengthened through reciprocal relationships rather than hierarchical forms of support (SAMHSA, 2014). These principles were reflected in the twinning model, where participants engaged as partners in shared learning rather than as helpers and recipients. Activities encouraged collaborative reflection, dialogue, and the co-construction of meaning through regular interaction and mutual exchange.

Finally, the principles of empowerment, voice and choice, together with attention to cultural, historical, and gender issues, encourage learners to participate as active contributors while recognising the influence of their social and cultural contexts on learning (SAMHSA, 2014). Within VBB, participants were encouraged to share their own experiences and perspectives without pressure to represent wider political or cultural positions. At the same time, facilitators remained attentive to the different realities shaping participants' lives and sought to ensure that discussions remained respectful, balanced, and sensitive to the unequal circumstances in which the dialogue took place.

Taken together, these principles shaped both the pedagogical design of VBB and the ethical responsibilities of the project team. They provided a practical framework for creating an intercultural learning environment that balanced meaningful dialogue with care, respect, and sensitivity to participants' lived experiences during ongoing conflict. These conceptual and pedagogical foundations are interconnected rather than mutually exclusive, as summarised in Figure 1.

**Figure 1**

*Conceptual and pedagogical foundations of voices beyond borders*



## THE VBB PROJECT: DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION

Having outlined the contextual and conceptual foundations of VBB, this section turns to the project itself. We present VBB as a reflective case study of a small-scale intercultural educational initiative developed during a period of severe educational disruption in Gaza. Rather than evaluating the project through measurable language outcomes, we focus on how it was designed and implemented, the participants involved, the forms of interaction that developed, and the challenges that shaped its implementation in practice.

### Participants and context

Before the twinning phase began, the Gaza-based and UK-based team members held a series of online planning meetings to discuss the aims, structure, and pedagogical orientation of the project. These discussions built on earlier locally implemented writing and speaking courses in Gaza, which were designed to help young women develop the linguistic confidence and expressive resources needed to write and speak about their lives, aspirations, and human experiences during wartime. The twinning phase therefore emerged not as a stand-alone activity, but as a further development of this preparatory work, shifting the focus from local English-language expression to intercultural dialogue and educational solidarity through English.

The Gazan participants were selected from among the young women who had demonstrated strong engagement and progress during the preceding writing and speaking course. The group consisted of 15 female participants aged between 16 and 20, including secondary school students and early-stage university students from the Middle Area of Gaza. They had an intermediate level of English and were able to use the language to express their ideas and experiences with growing confidence. They were motivated by a desire to connect with peers beyond Gaza, share their experiences with the wider world, and engage with different cultures despite the

restrictions imposed by war, displacement, and blockade. Since access to electricity and the internet at home could not be assumed, Senabil Association for Youth and Development provided a physical space, electricity, and internet access to support their participation.

The UK-based participants were recruited from a cohort of 45 MA TESOL students at The University of Manchester. The project was first introduced to the full cohort, after which interested students were invited to a follow-up meeting where the aims, expectations, and possible emotional demands of participation were discussed in more detail. Fifteen students volunteered to participate. All were Chinese in-service English language teachers who had already gained professional teaching experience before joining the MA TESOL programme.

Their participation was shaped by several overlapping reasons. Their willingness to participate was influenced partly by a broader context in which support for Palestine was familiar to many of them through public and political discourse in China. For some, participation reflected a humanitarian and ethical desire to learn more about the realities of life in Gaza and to contribute, in however small a way, to an educational initiative during a time of crisis. For others, the project offered a valuable opportunity to gain hands-on TESOL experience in an unfamiliar and challenging context. Their participation was therefore shaped by professional learning interests, humanitarian concern, and a wider sense of empathy, responsibility, and solidarity with Palestinian students living through war.

In the twinning phase, each Gazan participant was paired with a Chinese MA TESOL participant. The initial pedagogical plan was for pairs to meet weekly around a shared discussion topic, after which the Gazan participant would produce a short, written text in English and receive feedback from her partner. Writing was therefore positioned as a means through which Gazan participants could communicate their experiences, perspectives, and aspirations to a wider audience.

As the project developed, however, the interactions between pairs became more dialogic and reciprocal than the original writing-support model had anticipated. The emphasis gradually shifted from producing academic paragraphs to creating a space for mutual exchange, storytelling, and relationship-building. While the project team initially suggested discussion topics, participants were later encouraged to propose topics they found meaningful. This allowed conversations to move in directions shaped by the interests, experiences, and emerging relationships of each pair.

The project therefore developed around paired online meetings, supported by communication between the Gaza-based and UK-based teams. Padlet was used as a shared digital space where participants posted short summaries of their weekly conversations, read one another's ideas, and left comments. These posts created a visible record of the developing intercultural dialogue and helped the wider group remain connected while most interaction took place in individual pairs.

The project culminated in a final video activity. Each pair produced a short video on a topic they had found significant during their exchanges. The videos reflected the diversity of the conversations, including everyday life, learning experiences, cultural practices, future aspirations, and personal challenges. They were then shared during a final online celebration meeting, bringing participants together as a wider project community and marking the completion of the twinning phase.

### **Institutional challenges and adaptive responses**

The implementation of VBB was shaped by institutional, logistical, and emotional challenges. At the institutional level, the project developed within a wider context of caution around supporting educational work in Gaza. Although the project itself received strong support, particularly from the Social Responsibility team, its implementation was shaped by institutional concerns around risk, accountability, and the transfer of even small amounts of funding to Gaza. The difficulty, therefore, was not a lack of commitment to the project's aims, but the legal and financial caution surrounding practical support for activities on the ground. As a result, the project depended in its early stages on local implementation in Gaza and on personal rather than formal institutional financial support from members of the UK-based team. This created uncertainty, but it also reinforced the importance of trust, persistence, and relational commitment in moving the project forward.

During implementation, the most immediate challenges related to the unstable conditions in Gaza. Internet access was unpredictable, electricity was limited, and participants' ability to join online meetings was affected by displacement, repeated evacuation orders, winter weather, flooding, bombardment, drone noise, and the wider insecurity of everyday life. These conditions made fixed schedules difficult to maintain and meant that participation could not be assumed from week to week. In response, the team adopted a flexible approach to timing, communication, and participation. Rather than relying on whole-group online meetings, which quickly proved impractical, the project shifted towards paired meetings arranged according to the availability and circumstances of each pair.

The project also required attention to the different pressures experienced by both groups of participants. The Gaza-based participants were engaging from within a context of ongoing war, displacement, and severe infrastructural disruption. The Chinese MA TESOL participants, meanwhile, were balancing the project with the



demands of their academic programme, including coursework deadlines, while also encountering emotionally difficult accounts of life in Gaza. For some UK-based participants, this emotional burden included anxiety about forming close relationships with partners living under conditions of ongoing danger and uncertainty. For this reason, the team sought to avoid placing excessive emotional or academic burdens on either group. Participants were not required to share traumatic experiences, and pairs were given flexibility in choosing what to discuss and how to work together.

Support structures were developed on both sides. In Gaza, Senabil Association for Youth and Development provided the physical space, electricity, and internet access needed for participation, as well as local facilitation and follow-up. In the UK, the team provided online and on-site support for the MA TESOL participants through scheduled sessions to discuss questions, address concerns, and respond to difficulties emerging from the paired interactions. Ongoing communication between the Gaza-based and UK-based team members enabled practical issues to be addressed as they arose.

These adaptations were not simply logistical adjustments; they became central to how the project was sustained. Flexibility, responsiveness, and care allowed VBB to continue despite conditions that repeatedly disrupted participation. In this sense, the challenges encountered during implementation shaped the project's development, moving it away from a fixed course model and towards a more relational, participant-responsive form of intercultural educational solidarity.

### **Data sources and reflective analysis**

As a reflective qualitative case study, VBB was not designed as a formal intervention evaluation or as a study of measurable language gains. The analysis draws on participant and team reflections, Padlet posts, written outputs, final video artefacts, and records of communication between the Gaza-based and UK-based teams. At the end of the project, all participating students were invited to reflect on their experience, and their statements were written in the knowledge that they would form part of the project resources and might be used, in suitably anonymised form, for future dissemination. In using these project-based materials, the team remained attentive to confidentiality, participant anonymity, and the ethical sensitivity of drawing on reflections produced during an ongoing crisis. These materials were reviewed by the project team to identify recurring patterns in participants' experiences and in the forms of intercultural dialogue, voice, relationship-building, and educational solidarity that emerged through the project.

## **INSIGHTS FROM PARTICIPANT REFLECTIONS AND PROJECT ARTEFACTS**

### **From headlines to human connection**

One of the clearest themes across participants' reflections was a movement from distant representations of Gaza towards more direct forms of human connection. For the Chinese participants, the project disrupted an understanding of Gaza shaped mainly by news reports, political narratives, or statistics. Through sustained communication with their Gaza-based partners, they came to encounter Gaza through personal stories, everyday experiences, humour, study struggles, and future aspirations. As one Chinese participant reflected, the direct connection enabled her to move beyond "one-sided portrayals in the news" and to experience life in Gaza in a way that was no longer distant or impersonal.

For the Gaza-based participants, this shift was equally significant. Several reflections suggest that the project created a space in which they could be seen not only through the lens of war, suffering, or humanitarian need, but as young women with personalities, ambitions, friendships, and dreams. One participant explained that before the project she had feared that a non-Arab partner would see her only "with pity" or as "another headline from Gaza". What changed this expectation was not a formal learning outcome, but the quality of the relationship that developed. Her partner "saw me", asked about her daily life and dreams, laughed with her, and treated her as "a normal girl who happens to live in Gaza". This reflection captures an important dimension of the project's educational value: it created a space of recognition in which participants could encounter one another beyond dominant narratives of crisis.

A similar point appears in another Gaza-based participant's reflection. She explained that, through the conversations, her partner began to understand that "Gaza is not just something you see in the news, but a real place with real people who are trying to live and continue despite everything". This statement shifts the focus from Gaza as an abstract site of destruction to Gaza as a lived human reality. The project therefore enabled participants to engage with the people behind the headlines, while also allowing Gaza-based participants to represent their own lives in ways that included difficulty, strength, ordinary concerns, and future-oriented hope.

This movement from abstraction to recognition is central to the intercultural and ethical significance of VBB. The paired exchanges enabled participants to meet one another as individuals rather than as representatives of fixed national, cultural, or political identities. In this sense, the relationships that developed can be understood

through Holliday's (1999) notion of "small cultures", as each pair gradually created its own relational space through shared routines, topics, humour, trust, and care. VBB did not simply connect "Palestinian" and "Chinese" participants; it enabled individual participants to negotiate new meanings and relationships through sustained interaction. In this way, the project helped transform distance into dialogue, and representation into relationship.

### **English as voice, agency, and connection**

A second theme emerging from the reflections and project artefacts concerns the role of English as a resource for voice, agency, and connection. Although VBB initially included an academic writing dimension, participants' reflections suggest that the value of English extended beyond accuracy, fluency, or formal written production. English became a medium through which Gazan participants could articulate their experiences in their own terms and reach listeners beyond the geographical and political constraints of Gaza.

This was particularly evident in the reflections of Gazan participants, who described VBB as helping them express themselves with greater confidence. One participant explained that the twinning experience taught her "to better understand others and express my ideas with confidence and empathy". She also noted that sharing stories could "connect people across the world", suggesting that English functioned not simply as a language being practised, but as a means of entering into dialogue with others. Similarly, another Gazan participant reflected that the experience helped her find her voice "strong enough to carry my story across cultures". These reflections suggest that VBB supported participants in using English to speak from their own lived realities rather than being spoken about by others.

The project artefacts also illustrate this shift. Through Padlet posts and final video scripts, participants used English to discuss everyday life, study, food, cultural practices, future aspirations, and the disruptions caused by war. In one video script, a Gazan participant described university life under conditions of electricity cuts, weak internet, loneliness, and photocopied pages read by candlelight, while still holding on to the hope of experiencing "light, connection, and people around me". Such examples show how English became a means of narrating both the ordinary and the extraordinary dimensions of life in Gaza: not only suffering and disruption, but also humour, ambition, cultural pride, and future-oriented hope.

This use of English also changed the position of the Gazan participants within the educational encounter. They were not only learners receiving language support; they were narrators, cultural informants, partners, and meaning-makers. Their contributions shaped the direction of the conversations and the topics explored by each pair. As VBB developed, the focus moved away from writing about pre-assigned topics towards discussing issues that participants themselves considered meaningful. This shift strengthened participants' sense of ownership and allowed English to become a vehicle for agency as well as communication.

The significance of this theme becomes clearer when read through our framing of English as a *lingua franca*. English was not treated primarily as a language to be measured against native-speaker norms, but as a shared communicative resource that enabled participants from different linguistic backgrounds to listen, respond, negotiate meaning, and build relationships. In this sense, English supported both expression and connection: it helped Gazan participants make their stories heard, while also enabling Chinese participants to encounter these stories directly and relationally.

One Gazan participant described the ability to transform "struggles and experiences into a message that resonates with others" as "a victory in itself", adding that VBB made her feel that her story was "not just a set of numbers but a life worth telling". This statement brings together the central meaning of English in VBB: it became a language through which participants could move from being represented statistically or politically to being heard as persons with lives, voices, and stories that mattered.

### **Educational solidarity through reciprocal relationships**

A third theme concerns the way educational solidarity emerged through reciprocal relationships rather than one-way support. Although VBB was initially shaped by a desire to support young women in Gaza during severe educational disruption, participants' reflections suggest that its most meaningful outcomes developed through mutual exchange. The Gazan participants were not positioned simply as beneficiaries, nor were the Chinese MA TESOL participants positioned only as helpers or language tutors. Instead, the paired exchanges created opportunities for both groups to listen, share, learn, and be affected by one another's experiences.

This reciprocity is evident in the way participants described their relationships. One Chinese participant described her partner not only as someone she had met through a project, but as "my Gaza sister". She explained that they continued to communicate, care for each other, and share "plans and hopes for life, study, and the future". This reflection suggests that the relationship moved beyond the formal structure of VBB and became a personal connection shaped by care, emotional investment, and shared future-oriented conversations. At the same time, the participant's recognition of her own distance from war and her feeling that "any words of comfort feel so



powerless” reveals the ethical complexity of solidarity: it involves care and closeness, but also an awareness of unequal circumstances that cannot be resolved through words alone.

The Gazan participants’ reflections also show that solidarity was experienced through being treated as relational partners rather than as causes or passive recipients of sympathy. One participant explained that her partner “never treated me as a ‘cause’” but engaged with her as a person with daily life, dreams, and humour. This distinction is important. It suggests that solidarity in VBB was enacted by creating space for ordinary human recognition: laughter, curiosity, friendship, shared interests, and mutual care. In this sense, the project allowed participants to engage with the realities of Gaza without reducing Gazan participants to victimhood.

For the Chinese participants, these relationships also created new forms of learning. One participant described VBB as “a profound journey of human connection”, explaining that shared stories and empathy created “a bridge that no distance can break”. Another reflected that connecting with her Gazan partner and sharing stories had deepened her understanding of “solidarity across borders”. These reflections suggest that solidarity developed not primarily through abstract political agreement, but through the gradual formation of trust and the recognition of shared humanity across very different life conditions.

The paired structure of VBB was central to this process. Because participants met regularly in pairs, they were able to build continuity, familiarity, and trust over time. These repeated interactions allowed solidarity to become relational and dialogic. In keeping with the article’s earlier framing of educational solidarity, participants did not only learn about another context; they learned with another person. Rather than addressing the macro-level structural destruction of education in Gaza, VBB made a more modest but still significant contribution: it created a space where young people could encounter one another, care about one another, and sustain meaningful educational relationships despite war, blockade, distance, and institutional constraints.

### **Learning through difficulty and difference**

A fourth theme concerns the difficulties that emerged within intercultural communication and the learning made possible through them. While many participants’ reflections emphasised connection, friendship, and shared humanity, VBB also revealed that dialogue across different linguistic, cultural, and lived realities was not always straightforward. Participants entered the exchanges from unequal and unfamiliar contexts: one group was living through war, displacement, and educational disruption in Gaza, while the other was studying in the relative safety of the UK. These differences shaped not only what participants spoke about, but also how they listened, interpreted, and responded to one another.

One Chinese participant reflected candidly on the struggles and misunderstandings that arose during the exchange, noting that they were linked to cultural difference and to the different life experiences each partner brought to the interaction. However, she also described VBB as offering “a precious perspective” that she would not otherwise have gained. Her reflection suggests that difficulty did not undermine the value of the project; rather, it became part of its educational significance. Through moments of uncertainty, participants were invited to reflect on their own assumptions, recognise the limits of their prior understanding, and remain open to perspectives that were emotionally and culturally unfamiliar.

This participant’s reflection is especially important because it shifts the focus from communication as linguistic performance to communication as ethical listening. She explained that she had learned “to listen beyond words and sentences” in order to understand “emotions behind the words”. She also observed that what matters most in communication is not only how accurately or fluently one expresses oneself, but the extent to which empathy and common humanity can “bridge the gap and build genuine connection beyond words”. This insight resonates strongly with the project’s emphasis on English as a lingua franca: successful communication was not defined by native-speaker accuracy, but by participants’ willingness to negotiate meaning, listen carefully, and sustain connection across difference.

The video scripts and weekly exchanges also show that participants did not avoid difficult contrasts between their lives. They discussed university life, loneliness, uncertainty, electricity cuts, weak internet, crowded markets, food, celebrations, and future aspirations. In doing so, they created space for both difference and commonality. For example, one video script juxtaposed the experience of online university study in Gaza, marked by generators, weak internet, and studying by candlelight, with the experience of postgraduate study in the UK, marked by academic pressure, loneliness, and uncertainty about the future. The two experiences were not equivalent, but the dialogue allowed participants to recognise both the profound inequalities between their situations and the shared human concerns that connected them.

Learning through difficulty and difference therefore became one of VBB’s most significant outcomes. The project did not erase the unequal conditions under which participants lived and studied, nor did it resolve the emotional difficulty of encountering another person’s suffering from a position of relative safety. However, it created a supported space in which such differences could be approached with care, curiosity, humility, and respect. This matters because intercultural educational solidarity does not require the absence of misunderstanding or

discomfort. Rather, it requires a willingness to remain in dialogue, to listen beyond familiar frames, and to allow one's understanding of self and other to be changed through the encounter.

Taken together, these themes suggest that the significance of VBB lay not primarily in measurable language outcomes, but in the relational, ethical, and psychosocial possibilities opened through English-mediated dialogue.

## **DISCUSSION: FROM VIRTUAL EXCHANGE TO INTERCULTURAL EDUCATIONAL SOLIDARITY**

### **VBB as conflict-sensitive virtual exchange**

The themes discussed above position VBB within and beyond existing work on virtual exchange in conflict-affected contexts. The project confirms the value of online intercultural encounters for sustaining connection and educational continuity during disruption, while also showing that such encounters require careful attention to voice, trauma, unequal conditions, and ethical responsibility.

VBB shares several features with what O'Dowd (2026) describes as virtual exchange in contexts of conflict. Like other forms of virtual exchange, it used online communication to connect participants across borders and create opportunities for intercultural learning. However, in conflict-affected contexts, virtual exchange takes on additional significance: it can enable students to share lived experiences with international peers, maintain some form of educational continuity, and encounter perspectives that would otherwise remain inaccessible. Similar possibilities have been noted in TESOL teacher education, where virtual exchange with learners in a conflict-affected country enabled future teachers to examine assumptions, develop intercultural knowledge, and gain professional insights into teaching learners whose lives are shaped by violence and insecurity (Dietrich, 2022; Smit et al., 2023). At the same time, such exchanges are shaped by technical barriers, emotional sensitivities, unequal life conditions, and the need for preparation, flexibility, trust-building, and emotional safety (Lavrysh, 2024; O'Dowd, 2026; Katz, 2026).

VBB reflected these possibilities and challenges. For the Gazan participants, the paired exchanges offered a way to speak beyond Gaza and present their experiences directly rather than only being represented through news, statistics, or humanitarian discourse. For the Chinese MA TESOL participants, the project offered an opportunity to encounter Gaza relationally and personally, rather than as a distant political or media reality. In line with O'Dowd's (2026) emphasis on flexibility, trust-building, and emotional safety in conflict-related virtual exchange, VBB also showed that such work cannot be treated as ordinary online collaboration. It requires sensitivity to trauma, unstable infrastructure, emotional risk, and the unequal conditions under which participants enter the exchange.

This is particularly important when English-mediated virtual exchange involves storytelling from contexts of ongoing violence. For the Gazan participants, English became a means of narrating their lives, communicating beyond Gaza, and speaking back to representations that reduce Palestinian experience to numbers, headlines, or humanitarian categories. Yet inviting participants to share their experiences carried the risk of turning personal suffering into educational material for others. Piazzoli and Cullen (2021) describe storytelling with refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants as a "double-edged sword" that can either elevate or stigmatise the storyteller (Khamis & Dogbatse, 2025). VBB therefore needed to avoid positioning Gazan participants as witnesses whose role was to recount trauma for the learning of others. Instead, it sought to create conditions in which participants could decide what to share, how much to disclose, and how to represent their lives.

This ethical stance connects closely with critical trauma-informed pedagogy. Palanac (2026) argues that, in the context of Gaza, trauma-informed pedagogy in ELT cannot remain limited to individual symptom mitigation or classroom safety alone; it must also recognise the wider structural and political foundations of trauma and consider how educators might act in solidarity with learners experiencing injustice. VBB did not claim to resolve these structural conditions. However, it sought to create a careful educational space in which participants were not required to perform trauma, self-disclosure remained voluntary, and English could support agency, connection, and recognition.

### **From intercultural dialogue to educational solidarity with Gaza**

The insights also suggest the need to move beyond understanding VBB as intercultural exchange alone. The exchanges did not simply expose participants to cultural difference or provide opportunities to compare everyday life in Palestine, China, and the UK. Rather, they created a space in which participants encountered one another across profoundly unequal conditions and developed relationships shaped by listening, care, recognition, and shared responsibility.

This shift both resonates with and complicates existing discussions of intercultural education. On the one hand, the insights support the view that online intercultural encounters can enable participants to share lived experiences, challenge simplified representations, and develop more personal forms of understanding. On the other hand, the

Gaza context shows the limits of intercultural education if it remains focused only on dialogue, mutual understanding, or appreciation of difference. Badwan et al. (2026) argue for a turn from intercultural education to solidarity education in/with Gaza, emphasising that education must be grounded in justice, with-ness, and ethical responsibility rather than in neutral or purely cultural forms of exchange. VBB was much smaller and more limited than the transformative educational framework they call for, but its insights resonate with this orientation.

This resonance is visible in the relational nature of the paired exchanges. Participants did not only learn about another culture; they learned with another person. Gazan participants were able to speak about their lives, aspirations, and experiences in their own terms, while Chinese participants were invited to listen, respond, and reflect on their own positionality, privilege, and responsibilities as educators. This relational movement is consistent with understandings of educational solidarity as a practice based on reciprocity, agency, and mutual recognition rather than charity or one-directional support (Bajaj & Tow, 2021; Gaztambide-Fernández et al., 2022; Muciaccia & Macchia, 2025).

The findings also intersect with research on education and psychosocial support in Gaza. Menth and Al-Madi (2025) emphasise the importance of community-led, trauma-informed responses that integrate education with psychosocial care while centring Palestinian voices and local expertise (Dogutas, 2025). VBB was not a psychosocial intervention in a formal sense, but it shared this concern with creating educational spaces in which learning, expression, and emotional recognition were connected. In Gaza specifically, recent work has emphasised that children and young people cannot wait for a permanent ceasefire before educational activities resume, since access to safe educational spaces and learning activities can function as a protective mechanism for wellbeing, a way of maintaining a sense of normalcy, and a source of hope and confidence for the future (Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge, Centre for Lebanese Studies & UNRWA, 2024; Brunner et al., 2025). For the Gazan participants, VBB offered moments of emotional respite, restored possibility, and relational connection: a temporary movement away from the immediacy of bombardment, displacement, and loss towards a different educational and human experience (Peña et al., 2018).

### **The value and limits of small-scale educational solidarity**

VBB was a modest intervention with clear limits. The project did not rebuild educational infrastructure, compensate for the destruction of schools and universities, or address the structural causes of educational disruption in Gaza. It involved a small number of participants, depended on fragile internet and electricity access, and was sustained largely through relational commitment, local facilitation, and adaptive planning. Its significance should therefore not be overstated.

Rather, VBB matters because, in a context where formal education has been severely disrupted and young people have been increasingly cut off from ordinary educational and social possibilities, small relational spaces can matter. The VBB project interrupted isolation, enabled participants to remain connected to learning, and created opportunities for voice, recognition, and mutual care. This aligns with wider calls to restore education in Gaza not only as a matter of academic recovery, but also as a matter of rights, protection, psychosocial wellbeing, and hope (Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge, Centre for Lebanese Studies & UNRWA, 2024).

The project also offers practical insights for future intercultural educational initiatives in conflict-affected contexts. First, such projects need strong local grounding. In VBB, the role of Senabil Association for Youth and Development was essential because participation depended not only on online access, but also on the provision of a physical space, electricity, internet connection, and local facilitation. Second, both project organisers and participants need to remain flexible and responsive to changing conditions. Fixed schedules and standardised tasks are unlikely to work when learners face displacement, bombardment, power cuts, family responsibilities, and emotional exhaustion. Third, intercultural dialogue in such contexts requires preparation and support for all participants, including those outside the conflict zone, who may encounter emotional difficulty, uncertainty, and a sense of helplessness.

These insights reinforce the argument that solidarity education cannot be reduced to good intentions. It requires attention to power, infrastructure, ethics, and care. It also requires humility about what small projects can and cannot achieve. VBB does not offer a model to be copied mechanically; rather, it offers an example of how a small, locally supported, English-mediated virtual exchange can become a site of relational educational solidarity when shaped by trust, flexibility, and participant agency.

In this sense, the project contributes to broader conversations about education in and with Gaza. It shows that even small-scale initiatives can create meaningful openings for dialogue and recognition when they centre Palestinian voices and avoid treating Gaza only as an object of crisis or intervention (Dalgaldere, 2025). At the same time, the project points beyond itself. Its value depends on being understood not as an alternative to justice, reconstruction, and sustained educational rights, but as one modest contribution to keeping open spaces for learning, relationship, and shared humanity under conditions of profound disruption.

## CONCLUSION

We have presented VBB as a small-scale, English-mediated virtual exchange developed during severe educational disruption in Gaza. We have shown how an internationally supported, locally facilitated, and ethically grounded initiative created opportunities for young women in Gaza and mostly female Chinese EFL teachers undertaking MA TESOL studies in the UK to engage in intercultural dialogue, relationship-building, and educational solidarity through English as a shared communicative resource. While modest in scale, VBB illustrates how virtual exchange grounded in care, flexibility, and participant agency can open possibilities for voice, recognition, and relational educational solidarity in and with Gaza.

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## Ethical statement

The Voice Beyond Borders project was approved at The University of Manchester by the Faculty of Humanities Social Responsibility in the Curriculum and the School of Environment Education and Development Social Responsibility Catalyst funding bodies. We, the authors, confirm that the project conforms to international ethics standards regarding duty of care, informed consent, and participant and data anonymisation.

## Competing Interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

## Author Contributions

TE, SS, JW, SD & RF: Research concept and design, Collection and/or assembly of data, Data analysis and interpretation, Writing the article, Critical revision of the article, & Final approval of the article

## Data Availability Statement

The authors confirm that the data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article.

## AI disclosure

Several of the authorial team used artificial intelligence to gauge the accuracy and fluency of their English-medium academic writing. For example, they used versions of Chat GPT for synonym suggestions, grammar checking, and identifying possible publications related to the concepts and statistics used in the article.

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