

Buffett Undergraduate Research Fellowship Opportunity

Global classroom: Enhancing linguistic proficiency and intercultural competence in Chinese as a second language via virtual exchanges

Faculty Mentor: Yan Zhou, Assistant Professor of Instruction, Weinberg College of Arts and Sciences

Project Synopsis: This project examines Chinese as a second language (CSL) learners' linguistic growth and intercultural competence gained from regular virtual exchanges with Chinese native speakers. Virtual exchange has been proven effective in improving second language proficiency and intercultural competence – the ability to shift perspectives and communicate with people from other cultures. However, most studies rely on students' self-reported data. This project uses conversation analysis, an innovative qualitative method used to study linguistic and sociocultural norms through fine-grained analysis of naturally-occurring conversations, to collect and analyze audio and/or video recordings of conversations between a Chinese learner and a native speaker over the course of one school year. Specifically, the following aspects of CSL development in virtual exchange will be discussed: (1) How do students navigate challenging moments in conversations and develop these skills over time; (2) How do they acquire culturally appropriate verbal and non-verbal interactional cues (e.g., gestures and prosody) for expressing (im)politeness in Chinese overtime; (3) are there differences between students with and without a Chinese heritage background in terms of learning linguistic and cultural knowledge through conversing with a native speaker; and (4) what are the best practices of virtual exchange to maximize gains from virtual exchanges.

Project Term: Summer and Academic Year 2026

Project Location: Hybrid, on-campus

Job Description: Student research fellows will be involved in all stages of the project, including collecting conversational data, transcribing data following research conventions, analyzing and annotate verbal and non-verbal cues in conversations using linguistic analysis software such as ELAN and PRAAT, Students' contributions will be acknowledged in the faculty mentor's conference presentations and journal publications.

To participate in this project, the research fellows are expected to have a working knowledge of Mandarin Chinese. This includes native speakers or non-native speakers with at least three years of college-level Chinese language learning experience. Additionally, they should also be comfortable learning new software programs and adapting to new practices in an unfamiliar field. Preference will be given to

applicants who demonstrate reliable, timely communication and a strong commitment to producing high-quality work.

Time Commitment: The students will work about 200-220 hours in total on this project, including 60-80 hours during the summer, and 70 hours each in the fall and spring quarter (approximately 7 hours each week).

Number of available positions: One preselected, one open job search

