

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, Weinberg College of Arts & 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

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, forming and presenting initial observations and findings, and engaging in academic writing and presentation. From my previous experience working with students through the Undergraduate Research Assistant Program, I believe these skills will prepare them for future studies in fields such as linguistics, anthropology, communication, and sociology. I will also provide further guidance if the students are interested in developing an independent project after working with me. Students contributions will be acknowledged in my conference presentations and journal publications, which was what I did during the URAP program.

The first stage of the project is data collection, which will be completed over the Summer of 2025. The goal of data collection is 30 pairs of virtual exchange conversations between first-year and second-year Chinese students and their language partners, including 15 pairs of students with a Chinese heritage background, and 15 pairs without a Chinese heritage background. Student research fellows will first receive trainings on IRB conventions and common practices of data collection in linguistics and relevant fields of social science. They will then be responsible for recruiting participants (e.g., making recruitment flyers and screening participants), entering data information sheets, checking video/audio data quality, and organizing the data. Most of the data will be collected from Chinese learners who have participated in virtual exchange projects at Northwestern and other U.S. colleges. The research fellows will be responsible to host and record additional virtual exchange conversations on Zoom if necessary. I anticipate the students to work about 80 hours during the summer.

The second stage of the project focuses on data transcription, which is anticipated to complete during the Fall quarter of 2026. I will provide multiple training sessions on linguistic data transcription conventions and how to use the software ELAN and PRRAT. After the training and practice sessions, the research fellows will transcribe and proofread each other's transcripts. They will work for approximately 15 hours on training, practicing, and group meetings, and 35 hours on transcribing and proofreading.

The third stage of the project is initial analysis and annotation, which will happen in the Winter quarter of 2025. The research fellows are responsible for conducting initial analysis, annotating the data based on the annotation system that I developed, and presenting and discussing their observations during group meetings when there are ambiguities and disagreements. They will work approximately 40 to 50 hours in the process, including independent work and group meetings.

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.

Time Commitment: Hours for the project are flexible, although the students might need to accommodate the time differences between participants when collecting new data during Summer of 2025 (hosting Zoom conversations between Chinese learners and native speakers). I anticipate the students to work about 180-200 hours in total on this project, including 80 hours during the summer for data collection, and 40-50 hours each in the fall and spring quarter (approximately 5 hours each week).

Number of available positions: Two

