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## International Students Offer Language Expertise to Local Sixth Graders

May 12, 2015

BLOOMINGTON, Ill.— As a high school student in her hometown of Shandong, China, Xingchen (Stella) Wang '18 enjoyed tutoring Chinese children learning the English language. But it came as a surprise when she and other Illinois Wesleyan University students from China were offered the opportunity to help sixth graders at Thomas Metcalf School in Normal learn Standard Chinese, also known as Mandarin.

This year more than a dozen Illinois Wesleyan students volunteered each week in Dr. Lin Lin's class at Metcalf, talking about school, life in China and other conversational topics while speaking Mandarin. This is the first year of the Mandarin program at Metcalf.

Listening to a variety of native Mandarin speakers provides an authentic speaking environment for the Metcalf students, according to Lin.

The volunteer program was the idea of Brenda Wernick, whose son Dalton Spalding is in Lin's class. Wernick's husband, Professor Gabe Spalding, teaches physics at Illinois Wesleyan, so Wernick knew Illinois Wesleyan had welcomed a large cohort of Chinese students this academic year.

After approvals from Illinois Wesleyan's International Office and completion of a training session with Lin, the Chinese students began their volunteering sessions times per week. Wernick provided transportation to Metcalf for several of the IWU students.

Wernick said she believed it would be very helpful for the Metcalf students to converse with native speakers in learning such a challenging language. The Foreign Service Institute (FSI) of the U.S. Department of State estimates native English speakers will need more than a year and a half, or 2,200 class hours, to reach speaking and reading proficiency in Chinese. FSI categorizes Chinese as among the "hardest" languages for native English speakers to learn, in part because of its complex writing system including thousands of characters.

Lin said she has observed additional benefits as well. "Many of the native Mandarin speakers from IWU participate in Chinese cultural events in the community and with Metcalf students, so that provides a more well-rounded educational experience for the Metcalf students," she said.

A first-year student at Illinois Wesleyan, Wang said she has enjoyed the opportunity to meet more local residents. "When I participated in the Chinese New Year Celebration in Normal, I observed how supportive the professors, parents and residents are in constructing a diverse, compatible and friendly community," said Wang, a sociology major. "Volunteering [at Metcalf] inspires me because I saw how well students at Metcalf reacted, not only to learn a foreign language, but also to show interest in learning a different culture."



Illinois Wesleyan Chinese students volunteered each week to speak Mandarin with Thomas Metcalf School students in Dr. Lin Lin's class.



Ke (Coco) Zhang '18 (left) speaks with Metcalf sixth graders.