

Improving language proficiency through AI

ASU chatbot Language Buddy helps students participate in conversations at their level of proficiency

By Megan Neely, ASU News
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This year, the popular language-learning app Duolingo caught [public scrutiny](#) for its willingness to utilize artificial intelligence in its platform as fears of replacing humans in the workforce grew. But what if AI has more solutions for learning a language than we realize?

Through [Arizona State University's Innovation Challenge](#), the [School of International Letters and Cultures](#) sought to answer that question with their own AI tool for language learning. The challenge was born from ASU's collaboration with [OpenAI](#), the company behind ChatGPT, and encouraged faculty submissions on use cases with the new suite of AI tools.

That's where [Language Buddy](#) was born. Created by former Assistant Teaching Professor Christiane Reves and her colleagues, this AI chatbot is powered by generative AI and allows students to participate in conversations at their level of proficiency at any given time.

[Kristin Elwood](#), the director of digital initiatives and instructional design for the School of International Letters and Cultures, helps oversee the program and its implementation in German, French and Spanish classrooms.

"There's a big gap in the online language area that we have struggled with for a long time," Elwood said. "Within the in-person space, there is a lot of conversation practice, whether that is playing games, small groups or one-on-one. Students are put in situations where they're asked to engage with the language in real time, which is a very important aspect of language learning. In the online space, that's not easy to simulate because many online courses are asynchronous."

In summer 2024, the chatbot was used in an [online section of German 101](#), where 30% of the class opted to try out the program. Participants were able to choose prompts by opening ChatGPT on their phone and accessing the Language Buddy GPT through ASU's secure workspace. They used the audio function to begin a conversation with the chatbot.

After the course, 88% of the class expressed interest in using it for future coursework even if they hadn't used it at the time. Students also relayed their enjoyment of having the ability to practice whenever and wherever they wanted to without the fear of being judged for a mistake.

"We want them to just keep talking in that language and not worry as much about how accurate they are. That will come later with practice. So that's something that the AI can potentially give

them: It's not judging them, and so they feel like they're in a safer space to make mistakes," Elwood said.

Now in collaboration with [EdPlus](#) and [Enterprise Technology](#), Language Buddy is getting a more robust framework with the hopes of integrating it directly into Canvas, the university's course hub. The chatbot is set to receive an avatar that would work alongside assignments. It might even be able to provide corrective feedback and grading recommendations to instructors.

Concerns around accuracy are still being tackled, common with new AI platforms and interfaces. Beyond advancing language skill sets faster than a student is ready for, the chatbot also experienced issues switching to new languages mid-sentence. However, it's not new for generative platforms to experience issues like these, including programs like the Google Translate application, known for using improper grammar structures.

"We started noticing that there were times that Language Buddy would start at an appropriate novice level, using the correct vocabulary in structures and speaking at a slower pace. Then out of nowhere it would become more advanced," Elwood said. "It would start talking about these high-level concepts that the students wouldn't have the knowledge to do anything with yet."

Since its launch, professors have been tasked with "breaking" the program to fix errors like these, acting as students and conversing in languages other than their expertise, including French, German and Spanish. This enabled them to track where the program failed and what areas its training needed to be strengthened.

The use of AI has also brought up concerns of academic integrity. When it comes to platforms like Google Translate, instructors have found ways to pick up on when a student copy-and-pastes their work. At The College, they're finding ways around improper AI usage by redesigning courses and shifting perspectives.

"We are slowly moving away from the idea of catching students cheating to trying to help them understand how to transparently say, 'Hey, I used AI to create an outline, or I used it to gather this information,'" Elwood said. "Perhaps it's going to become more about demonstrating the critical thinking behind the writing. Students might be expected to speak with confidence and fluency while also providing the rationale for the points they're making."

Now, a new and improved pilot version of the chatbot has been developed for one of the school's Spanish 101 courses later this fall. Language Buddy's team will gather data on student and grading feedback throughout this upcoming school year.

Elwood emphasizes that a technology like Language Buddy is not meant to replace instructor interaction, but rather supplement student learning to support proficiency and retention.

"We want all of our students to be able to experience language and culture through an authentic lens, but as I said, that's been difficult in the online learning space. Ultimately, we'd like them to have an integrated experience, with as many opportunities to react to a variety of real-time situations as possible," Elwood said. "Virtually interacting with Language Buddy isn't the same as going out and living it in the actual environment, but the use of Language Buddy has the potential to help us close that gap."

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Main image



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