

Fluent Futures Lab teaches what English textbooks miss

ASU lab uses immersive technology to teach international students how to navigate real-world conversations, cultural nuance and everyday interactions

By Tiffany Gonzalez, ASU News
February 6, 2026

Learning English is about more than mastering key vocabulary and demonstrating verb tenses — it's about knowing what to say, how to say it and when. At Arizona State University, the [Fluent Futures Lab](#) is reshaping English language learning for international students by focusing on real-world communication and cultural nuance, not just grammar rules.

Housed within [Global Launch](#), ASU's English language and academic preparation unit, the lab is led by English language educator [Emilia Gracia](#), whose doctoral research in using virtual reality to teach second-language pragmatics — the study of how language functions in social and cultural contexts — inspired the lab.

While many international English-language learners develop and even arrive with strong grammar and vocabulary skills, Gracia says they often struggle with everyday interactions that are essential to building relationships with local students and other ASU affiliates on campus.

"Second-language pragmatics focuses on how people navigate real-world interactions," she said. "Skills that come naturally to many fluent speakers, from apologizing for being late to class to politely turning down an invitation or asking for a favor; interactive tasks such as these are rarely taught explicitly, despite being critical for student success."

Gracia said there is often an assumption that students will simply acquire these skills by being immersed in an English-speaking environment; however, research suggests that this is not always the case.

These gaps can also lead to misunderstandings in the classroom. For example, students and instructors can clash when second-language learners are perceived as impolite, too direct (or not direct enough), when, in reality, they may have only been lacking second-language pragmatic competence. Students need instruction, practice and feedback in order to learn second-language pragmatics, as with any other language skill. While most courses (at least at Global Launch) do

include communicative speaking activities in the curriculum, they often lack opportunities for students to receive real-time feedback or engage in authentic conversations focused on pragmatic skills.

To address this, Gracia partnered with [IMMERSE](#) to provide an AI language-learning experience at Global Launch that creates a low-pressure environment where students can practice real-life communication and build confidence. In partnership with ASU's Next Lab, which provided VR headsets and instructional space, the Fluent Futures Lab started to form.

The hands-on research found that immersive virtual environments allow students to practice socially appropriate language in ways that closely mimic real-life situations.

Data from a 16-week pilot of IMMERSE within ASU's Global Launch program suggest that immersive, AI-supported speaking practice can help reduce anxiety and strengthen real-world communication skills for English learners. The pilot included 199 English learners who used IMMERSE to practice speaking in realistic, three-dimensional environments, such as workplaces, service settings and everyday social scenarios, outside of scheduled class time.

Findings included:

Students experienced a 39% reduction in foreign language anxiety over the course of the pilot, addressing one of the most common barriers to speaking in real-world settings.

Measures of oral fluency improved by 21%, while task completion (the ability to successfully navigate a communicative situation) increased by 20%.

Nearly half of the participants (45%) reported that the immersive practice helped them maintain motivation to continue practicing their English-speaking skills.

The findings show that low-pressure, authentic practice opportunities can help students build confidence and apply language skills more effectively beyond the classroom. That need has long been voiced by students themselves, Gracia said.

"Having worked at Global Launch since 2013, one of the things I have heard students request the most is to improve their speaking outside of class," she said. "They always ask us what they can do to improve their speaking, and comment that they feel embarrassed when talking to English speakers."

International students often want to form friendships with domestic students, she added, but lack confidence in how to approach and maintain those relationships.

"They may have the grammar and the vocabulary needed to perform a task that involves conversation; however, it is likely that they are unsure of how to initiate a contextually appropriate conversation in any given situation," Gracia said. "And even if they do make initial contact, maintaining a relationship is hard. This is where our research comes in."

Catching the attention of IMMERSE leadership, Gracia was invited to attend Meta's first-ever Educators Community Summit to share her findings with other attendees in the ed-tech space. She

has since returned to Meta as a panelist and research partner, most recently attending in November and December 2025.

“I got to meet other people who were using virtual reality for not just language learning, but for training in fields such as dentistry, nursing, automechanics and many more,” Gracia said. “The affordances of immersive technology (virtual reality, extended reality, augmented reality) are vast and should be harnessed for optimal language acquisition.”

Through a Meta-funded grant in partnership with [Dan Munnerley](#), executive director of [Next Lab](#), Gracia is also exploring the use of AI-enabled wearable glasses to support English learners. The technology allows students to access live captions, translations and navigation tools through displays embedded in the lenses.

“A student could go to a building and say, ‘Am I at the right building for this class? How do I get there?’” Gracia said. “They can ask questions in their language and Meta will respond. It’s comforting and helpful.”

The wearables are being tested alongside the development of FluentZ, an AI-powered English-language companion app designed specifically for Global Launch students. Developed with Gracia and [Bryan Smith](#), her former dissertation chair and now affiliated faculty of Fluent Futures Lab, and [Jinjing Zhao](#), AI experience manager from ASU’s [AI Acceleration Team](#), while also being supported by the [LEI Principled Innovation Grant](#), the app aims to combine language learning with cultural understanding, allowing students to practice authentic communication both inside and outside the classroom.

The Fluent Futures Lab will pilot these technologies with Global Launch students on campus in Tempe, with research and testing expected to continue over the next six months to a year. Gracia hopes to publish her findings and expand access to tools that help students navigate both language and culture.

“The reason why I chose this work is because this aspect of language is not commonly taught, though it is highly necessary,” Gracia said. “We have researchers in our field who study and publish on second-language pragmatics, but very few teachers actually teach it. Textbook companies don’t typically include pragmatics instructions or activities, and teachers are not typically trained in pragmatics instruction.”

She added that despite progress in pragmatics research, the implementation of second-language pragmatics instruction in the classroom is lagging behind, also due to the complexity of regional varieties of language.

“For example, English teachers themselves will argue that their pragmatics may be different from yours because they’re from New York and you’re from LA — we have different ways of communicating,” Gracia said.

For Gracia, that complexity makes the work even more necessary — and central to helping international students feel confident, connected and supported as they build relationships at ASU and beyond.

This story originally appeared on [ASU News](#).

Main image



A Global Launch student uses a VR headset in the Fluent Futures Lab. Photo courtesy of Global Launch

Gallery



Emilia Gracia (right) and a colleague pose in front of their research poster at Meta's Educators Community Summit.



Gracia speaks at Meta's Educators Community Summit.



Gracia (center, standing) assists two students with VR learning at the ASU Next Lab.