

Busuu.com vs. Lang-8: Evaluating the acquisition of the writing skills

Nicolás Pino James
University of Warwick, UK

ABSTRACT

This report seeks to critically evaluate and compare the websites *Busuu.com* (www.busuu.com) and *Lang-8* (www.lang-8.com) with the aim of unveiling how they operate as Internet-based distance learning providers in the acquisition of writing skills. This task will be performed under diverse sections whereby the major features, potential advantages and setbacks will be briefly exposed with special focus of attention on *Lang-8*. Additionally, examples of their application will be given as means of further understanding of the websites. Finally, an overall conclusion will set out the hypothesis for this report.

Keywords: *Busuu; Lang-8; writing skills; CALL; evaluation*

DESCRIPTION OF WEBSITES

Lang-8

This free website created and developed by *Lang-8 Inc* in Japan constitutes a 2.0 asynchronous communication channel addressed to language learners of a wide variety of levels and ages. Founded in 2007, it attracts more than 200,000 users from 180 different countries. *Lang-8* represents an integrative CALL (Computer Assisted Language Learning) approach to using technology in the acquisition of writing skills. As Warschauer states, the integrative call is a perspective "based on a socio-cognitive view of language learning" (Warschauer 2000, p.65).

Generally speaking, *Lang-8* works essentially as an enormous computer-mediated discussion list whereby thousands of comments are posted for their subsequent correction by the users of the site. This participatory scenario (James 2011) is clearly organized and enclosed by two side menus (composed by various modules) and a top main menu (Figure 1). Thus, the right-hand side menu displays the contact information as well as the latest news of the site whereas the left-hand side menu contains the current status of comments and corrections, a list of friends and the joined groups –amongst other options. On the other hand, the top [main] drop-down menu bar is divided into diverse sections that break down into categories. The former menu gives instant access to the major sections of the website such as the writing editor, friends search and latest posts.



Figure 1: Lang-8 menus

Overall, the chief service offered by this website consists of a bidirectional correction of multi-topic writing excerpts provided by the very own users –whose native language has to match with the language of the text.

Busuu.com

Busuu.com was launched in 2007 by Bernhard Niesner and his co-founder Adrian Hilti in Spain. Since then onwards, this learning environment has been supplying its [major] services for free to more than 1 million language learners from different countries, ages and levels. Surprisingly enough, this website fuses the perspectives of communicative and integrative CALL (Warschauer & Healey 1998, p.68) under the same roof. In other words, in addition to the integrative approach –seen in *Lang-8*– that entails the use of the Internet (and multimedia computers), the communicative method involves risk-taking and stimulates learners to achieve communicative competence (Richards & Renandya 2003). On this note, this website symbolizes an enormous e-learning community that embraces communicatively diverse skills of the language learning progress.

Busuu.com is framed by an eye-catching and user-friendly interface that gives access dynamically to all its contents (Figure 2). Thus the homepage comprises on the one hand, a top menu disclosing the main options of the site (e.g., preferences, help, feedback, etc.) and a top submenu in charge of orienting users in the search of essential information (e.g., friends, messages, courses, etc.). By contrast, the core of the site is split in a left-hand side menu –presenting a set of modules containing basic [but relevant] information such as the berry ranking– and a central area –consisting of the *Busuu* garden, a list of friends, an overview of the users online and a list of posts to be checked.



Figure 2: Busuu.com menus

As depicted by this brief description, the layout of the website is tailor-made to users so that they might consult and monitor information about their linguistic achievements rather easily. By and large, the aim of this website is to empower the learner with an insight into the four linguistic skills with the help of instructional materials, computer-based [non-drill] activities, and synchronous peer-to-peer communication *in situ*.

EVALUATION AND COMPARISON

The aforementioned websites seem to deviate slightly when it comes to their evaluation. Both of them comply with the 'formal' characteristics of assessment. That is to say, they include contact details, credentials, further information on the website (i.e. Press archive in *Busuu.com*), facts and figures, help service, last update, and etcetera). Nonetheless, their comparison results in a complex task since *Busuu.com* is a 'giant' that works on a higher [multi-tasking] level. In other words, whereas *Busuu.com* embraces the four linguistic skills (speaking, listening, writing and reading), *Lang-8* only focuses its attention on the writing skills. Therefore, their comparison must be carried out in terms of accessibility and functionality only in the writing sections of the sites.

The onset of the contrast between both sites begins with the self-registration procedure (Franklin and Harmelen 2007). On the one hand, *Busuu.com* presents an ordinary and appealing registration form that stores users' information privately in its server –following the common online procedure. On the other hand, *Lang-8* publishes and scatters its members' personal information on the Internet by default (Figure 3). Therefore, unless users are aware of the existence of these options, they might end up unconsciously pooling all their personal details onto the net.

The screenshot shows the 'Enter Profile' registration form on the Lang-8 website. The form is titled 'Enter Profile' and includes a red note that '(*) are required'. The fields are as follows:

- Nickname (*)
- Year of Birth
- Native language (*)
- Nation and region
- Sex (*)
- Language you are studying (1) (*)
- Language of study (2)
- Purpose of study (1) (*)
- Location
- Time Zone (*)
- E-mail address (*)
- Password (*)
- Verify Password (*)

On the right side of the form, there are five dropdown menus, each labeled 'Share with all Internet users'. These dropdown menus are highlighted with a red rounded rectangle, indicating that personal information is shared by default. Below the dropdown menus is a 'Preview' button.

Figure 3: Dissemination of personal information by default in *Lang-8*

On another note, one of the significant setbacks –in comparison to *Busuu.com*– that must be highlighted in the registration form of *Lang-8* is that users are not classified according to their

knowledge of the target language (Figure 4). Put differently, despite the fact that this website works according to a *write-and-correct* system –and as a result, stratification in levels is not necessarily required–, correctors must have an indicator to perform their duties or they will not be able to provide appropriate feedback otherwise.

The image shows a registration form titled "Enter Profile". At the top, it says "(*) are required". The form contains the following fields and options:

- Nickname (*)
- Year of Birth: Select
- Native language (*): Select
- Nation and region: Select
- Sex (*): Select
- Language you are studying (1) (*): Select (highlighted with a red box)
- Language of study (2): Select (highlighted with a red box)
- Purpose of study (1) (*):
 - Academic study
 - Business
 - International exchange
 - Others
 - Study abroad
 - Travel
- Location: Select
- Time Zone (*): (GMT-10:00) Hawaii
- E-mail address (*): englishceedcv@gmail.com
Your E-mail address is kept strictly confidential
- Password (*): *****
Your password should include 6-12 normal-width letters or numbers.
- Verify Password (*):

There are "Share with all Internet users" dropdown menus next to several fields. A "Preview" button is at the bottom.

Figure 4: Inexistence of language level classification in the registration form

On another matter, once registered and allowed to use the contents of the site, members can devise a remarkable difference in the appearance of the site. That is to say, whilst *Busuu.com* presents a straightforward organization of its materials which are clearly discernable by the members of the learning environment –consequently encouraging navigation–, in *Lang-8*, navigation is hindered by the vast amount of advertisement comprised in the website (Figure 5). However, these announcements can be removed by acquiring a premium account.



Figure 5: Contrast between the homepages of the websites

Differently from *Busuu.com*, *Lang-8* offers a list of more than a thousand groups as an extra feature to hone the writing skills (Figure 6). These groups are sorted in pages according to the last added rather than by subject matter. As a result, the only way to look for a group is reduced to either turning virtual pages or filtering the groups through the search box. This gives the impression of disorganization and abandonment of the section that seems to have grown without any supervision hence becoming a sort of mess. Nonetheless, as the list of groups reveal, the most relevant topics deal with *Skype* language exchange that indicates an urgent need for the site to branch out into the speaking sphere.

The screenshot shows the Lang-8 website interface. At the top, there is a navigation bar with links for 'Home', 'Premium', 'Help', 'Messages', 'Settings', and 'Logout'. Below this is a Groupon banner for shoes in Birmingham with a -70% discount. The main content area is titled 'Groups' and shows a search bar with '19 groups found.' and a search button. Below the search bar are 'Latest Topics' such as 'Can you tell me English study method.', 'Women and Stereotypes', 'Please introduce yourselves!', 'The best K-POP group', 'Being a student.', 'Your favorite song?', 'Starbucks Pranks', 'Musica, Music, 日本人!', 'Soccer World Cup', 'Must_keep_group_ALIVE! (Lol English! lol)', and '"Have Been V-ing" When Do We Use It? No body else to learn Korean?!!'. The main list of groups includes:

Group Name	Description	Threads	Members
SKYPE ME	All Skype users, let's chat! You can't learn a language without actually speaking it. Skype(スカイプ)...	293	2154
Skype group for Japanese/English learners.	This is a group I have created to allow members of Lang-8 to contact each other through Skype. ...	78	999
German - Deutsch Skype	Du weißt doch, wie schwer es Deutsche zu finden, welche Skype auch haben. Also wann do mit jern...	4	66
Korean Community 한국어를 좋아해요!	한국어를 공부하고 있는 사람들. 한국어에 관심을 갖고 있는 사람들. 한국어를 사랑하는 사람들을 위한 커뮤니티입니다. This is a community for people ...	80	1585
www.osakabentures.com	For a banner (on my web-site), www.osakabentures.com. どうですか! 満州の文化-国際サイトの登録プランは 社員も怪訝しています...	0	1
Skype meeting for all English learner	We create a Skype voice chat meeting for all English learner. Let me know if you are interested ...	47	491

Figure 6: Sample of the lists of groups

Finally, as far as the premium account is concerned, *Lang-8* only gives access to minimal extra features that do not make a real difference from the non-premium account for the average user (Figure 7). If the premium account (Figure 8) in *Busuu.com* unveils new *authentic materials* which Kilickaya defines as those that “interact with the real language and content rather than the form” (Klickaya 2004, p.1). These encompass state-of-the-art exercises, grammar guides, video units, printable PDFs, podcasts, etc., *Lang-8* awards users fundamentally by ‘emphasizing’ their entries –also available in *Busuu.com* as a premium member–, offering correction data download as PDF and enlarging the amount of data that users can generate within the website.

2 Comparison of Free Account to Premium Account

	Free	Premium
Price	Free	* \$5/month or \$45/year
Journal Entries	✓	✓
Correcting/Being corrected	✓	✓
Journal and Correction Data Downloaded as a PDF		✓
New! Additional learning languages select.	Limited 2 learning languages.	Unlimited
New! No advertisements (only for the first 2,000 people.)	Always show	Don't Show
New! Emphasizing entries		✓
New! Priority seat of entries		✓
New! Max number of messages allowed to send per day.	20	Unlimited
Number of FootPrints pages	1page	Unlimited
Max Number of Corrected Sentences Allowed to add to Notebook	500	Unlimited
Personal URL		✓
Personal Journal Search		✓

*When you choose Yahoo!Wallet(Yahoo!Japan only) for payment, you have to pay in Japanese Yen(525 Yen/month including tax)and only monthly course is available.

Figure 7: Lang-8 premium account

What are the advantages of becoming a Premium member?

Awarded by:

	Premium Membership	Free Membership
Picture based vocabulary in Spanish, French, German, Italian, Russian, Portuguese and English	✓	✓
Writing exercises	✓	✓
Reading comprehension exercises	✓	✓
Video Chat Application for live-talk	✓	✓
Interactive exams	✓	✓
Audio for more than 3,000 key phrases 🗣️ (sample)	✓	✗
Listening comprehension exercises 🗣️ (sample)	✓	✗
Printable PDF's for more than 150 units 🗣️ (sample)	✓	✗
Access to more than 35 Grammar Units 🗣️ (sample)	✓	✗
Audio Podcasts for more than 150 units 🗣️ (sample)	✓	✗
Video Units 🗣️	✓	✗
Customized review (new) 🗣️ (sample)	✓	✗
Your writing exercises corrected first (new) 🗣️	✓	✗
Travel Course (new) 🗣️	✓	✗
Official busuu.com Certificate 🗣️ (sample)	✓	✗
MyBusuu - Your individual study guide 🗣️	✓	✗
... and no advertisement is shown! 🗣️	✓	✗

Figure 8: Busuu.com premium account

EXAMPLES OF APPLICATION ON THE WRITING SKILLS

Lang-8

Lang-8 invites its users to 'sharpen' their writing skills by a simple operation of collaborative problem-solving (Jenkins *et al.* 2006) Accordingly, the members of the site act first of all, as *learners* and then as *teachers* in return for their corrections. On playing the part of the correctors or 'teachers', they are meant to proofread and provide feedback on random pieces of writing. Additionally, corrections are awarded [and tracked] with points that work as an incentive to encourage further corrections. Conversely, the working procedure for the 'learner' is rather straightforward: firstly, through the top menu bar access is gained to the text editor. Secondly, once the entry has been written it becomes part of the extensive 'dashboard' whereby it is placed on top of the list. Nevertheless, the virtual board does not encompass the submitted written entries but only the ones meant to be corrected –that is to say, the hypothetical dashboard of a Spanish student of English would show only entries written in Spanish rather than English posts dropped by the student. Therefore the members of the site are not able to see the actual position of their posts in the list. Finally, as the last step of this process learners obtain rapid assessment on their productions obviously depending on the length of the text.

Busuu.com

In similar fashion to *Lang-8*, this website approaches the writing skills by the computer-based [asynchronous] method of *write-and-correct* –although it has to be borne in mind that the vocabulary section through its sound-identification activities also work on the writing area. Yet, *Busuu.com* rather than stimulating the free-topic writing it helps the learner by selecting and setting up an appropriate subject of interest. Evidently, the difficulty of the topic –that relies on a *Can Do Statement* (Jones 2001) – corresponds to the level of the student and it is supported by topic-related vocabulary (with pictures) to facilitate the production of the written work. Moreover, once the text is submitted a pop-up window gives the opportunity to choose among up to five members of the community to proofread the piece of writing. Ultimately, similarly to *Lang-8*, users normally receive immediate feedback from their markers –not taking more than half an hour for a text to be corrected.

CONCLUSION

This report has put forward the superiority of the online language resource *Busuu.com* over *Lang-8* in the teaching of writing skills. This learning environment not only approaches genuinely its writing section but also it does so in a more accessible, well-structured, trustworthy and professional way. Even though both sites share the same intended audience (language students) and similar computer-mediated teaching systems (*write-and-correct*), *Busuu.com* works better on users' needs encouraging them to work in harmony in a sophisticated [and appealing] virtual space –hence demonstrating the importance of visual ergonomics (James 2011). Furthermore, this site provides a complete array of resources for the four linguistic skills becoming [centralized] eye-candy for language learners. In contrast, the fundamental setbacks of *Lang-8* mentioned above (e.g. registration form, tangled interface, etc.) catalogues this website as fairly unprofessional giving the feeling of being poorly maintained. *Lang-8* should be aware of the enormous online impact of *Busuu.com* on the domain of CALL and they should react against that, otherwise the site could be in serious trouble (i.e. migration of its users) in a not too distant future.

REFERENCES

- Franklin, T. & Harmelen, M. 2011. *Web 2.0 for Content for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education* [online] Available at <<http://ie-repository.jisc.ac.uk/148/1/web2-content-learning-and-teaching.pdf>> [Accessed 10 January 2011]
- Jenkins, H., Purushotma, R., Clinton, K., Weigel, M. & Robinson, A., 2006. *Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21 st Century*. Chicago: MacArthur Foundation.
- James, N.P. 2011. 'Speechy Project: Answering the Demands of the Modern User' in *Multiple Voices in Academic and Professional Discourse: Current Issues in Specialised Language Research, Teaching and New Technologies*. ed. by Maruenda-Bataller, S. and Clavel-Arroita, B. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing
- Jones, N. 2001. 'The ALTE Can Do Project and the Role of Measurement in Constructing a Proficiency Framework'. *Research Notes* 5, 5-8
- Kilickaya, K. 2004. 'Authentic Materials and Cultural Content in EFL Classrooms' *The Internet TESL Journal* [online] X, (7). Available at <<http://www.metu.edu.tr/~kilickay>>
- Lang-8 Inc 2011. *Lang-8* [online] Available at < <http://lang-8.com/>> [Accessed 11 January 2011]
- Niesner, B. & Hilti, A. 2011. *Busuu.com* [online] Available at <<http://www.busuu.com>> [Accessed 12 January 2011]
- Richards, W. & Renandya, A. 2002. *Methodology in Language Teaching: An Anthology of Current Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Warschauer, M. 2000. 'The Death of Cyberspace and the Rebirth of CALL'. *English Teachers' Journal* 1, 61-67.
- Warschauer, M., & Healey, D. 1998. 'Computers and Language Learning: An Overview'. *Language Teaching* 31, 57-71

Copyright for articles published in this journal is retained by the authors, with first publication rights granted to the journal. By virtue of their appearance in this open access journal, articles are free to use, with proper attribution, in educational and other non-commercial settings.

Original article at: <http://ijedict.dec.uwi.edu/viewarticle.php?id=1289>