# 4 Busuu: how do users rate this app for language learning?

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## Abstract

Busuu (https://www.busuu.com) is one of several existing Social Networking Sites for Language Learning (SNSLLs). According to Álvarez (2016), it has all the features an SNSLL should have. However, once Busuu migrated to a mobile compatible platform in 2016, it lost some of the social aspects of a Social Networking Site (SNS) determined by Boyd and Ellison (2008) and Duffy (2011). As the most used language learning platform worldwide (Busuu, n.d), the user experience of its learners is of interest to the field of Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL). A pilot study to see how users rate it was conducted at an English university for four weeks. This chapter shows the results of that research.

Keywords: ICTs, Busuu, social networking sites, SNSLLs, informal language learning.

## 1.  Introduction

Busuu defines itself as "the world's largest social network for language learning, providing courses in 12 different languages on web and mobile to more than 70 million learners worldwide" (Busuu, n.d). Busuu learners can train their language skills through self-paced learning units following the Common European Framework of Reference for languages (CEFR), from A1 to B2 levels.

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The platform offers three different versions on the web and for mobile devices: free, premium, and professional.

The issue of social interaction on SNSs has been the topic of some research. Blattner and Lomicka (2012) suggested that the social interaction that takes place in such environments helps students to develop their pragmatic competence. Previously, Lee (2006) argued that the frequency of use of those SNSs has a positive impact on learners' oral proficiency, vocabulary acquisition, and syntactic complexity.

In contrast, it is important to underline that even if students may not receive enough grammar instruction from these SNSLLs, according to Lin, Warschauer, and Blake (2016), they still feel they make significant improvements, because, for most of them, this is the first experience of using their L2 in meaningful conversations with others. Nonetheless, as Jones (2001) had pointed out before, it may be difficult to engage users over a long period without teachers or peers to drive the CALL process.

Accordingly, different authors have focussed their research on SNSLLs (Lamy & Zourou, 2013; Liu et al., 2015), and some have recently focussed specifically on Busuu (Álvarez, 2016; Rosell-Aguilar, 2016; Vesselinov & Grego, 2016). When Busuu migrated to a mobile compatible platform in 2016, it conformed to only three of the eight social aspects identified in SNSs by Boyd and Ellison (2008) and Duffy (2011), namely: create a profile, upload content, and receive feedback. This chapter is centred in the assessment the users made of Busuu as an SNSLL after such a change.

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1. Context and sample

The participants in this study had complete access to the premium version, provided for free by Busuu for research purposes. Following the platform

recommendation, the participants were asked to use it daily for a minimum of 10 minutes per day for four weeks, which was the length of the research project. The participants were not asked to fulfil a maximum of hours, as the study tried to reflect the spontaneity of use of other learners.

Using convenience sampling, 268 students from the database of the Worldwise Centre of the University of Central Lancashire were invited via email to take part in this study. Then, using purposive sampling, 14 people were selected: seven (50%) of them had a CEFR A1 level, three (21.42%) A2, two (14.28%) B1, and two (14.28%) B2. That selection led to a diverse group, as Table 1 shows.

Table 1.   Generic data of the participants

| Participant | Gender | Age | Nationality | Academic background | Spanish level |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| pa01 | F | 49 | British | Graduate | B2 |
| pa02 | F | 20 | British | Undergraduate | A2 |
| pa03 | F | 54 | British | Graduate | A1 |
| pa04 | F | 51 | British | Graduate | A2 |
| pa05 | F | 23 | British | Undergraduate | A2 |
| pa06 | M | 24 | British | Undergraduate | A1 |
| pa07 | M | 47 | British | Graduate | B1 |
| pa08 | M | 23 | British | Undergraduate | A2 |
| pa09 | M | 33 | Belarusian | Graduate | A1 |
| pa10 | F | 18 | British | Undergraduate | A2 |
| pa11 | F | 23 | British | Undergraduate | A2 |
| pa12 | F | 33 | Italian | Graduate | B2 |
| pa13 | M | 44 | British | Graduate | B1 |
| pa14 | F | 21 | Greek | Undergraduate | A2 |

## 2.2.    Data collection tools

Based on previous studies that have used similar instruments to evaluate other SNSLLs (Liu et al., 2015), the data collection tools used in this research are presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Data collection tools
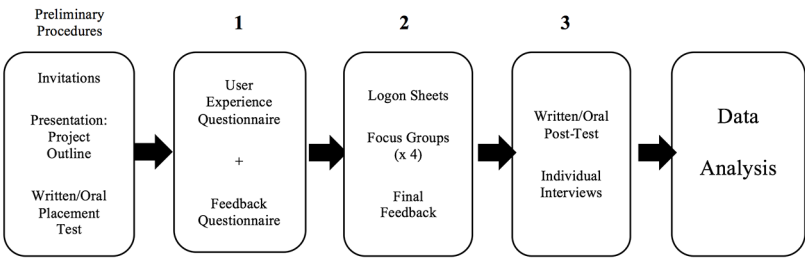


## 3. Discussion of outcomes

As this chapter is focussed on how learners rate Busuu, five different variables obtained from the data collection tools are explored: (1) features that can be found in Busuu; (2) feedback on site design; (3) pre- and post-test results; (4) the social aspect of Busuu; and (5) general perception of the site.

### 3.1. Features that can be found in Busuu

The results obtained via the data collection tools show that learning is not participatory in Busuu. On the contrary, individual learning is encouraged with its current layout, which is counter to a community of practice where learners should share goals and be engaged in continuous collaborative and meaningful activity.

Table 2. Features that can be found in Busuu

| Measurable aspect | 1 | | 2 | | 3 | | 4 | | 5 | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Pre | Post | Pre | Post | Pre | Post | Pre | Post | Pre | Post |
| 1. Creating a profile | 3 | 2 | 6 | 7 | 5 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 2. Friending | 7 | 6 | 1 | 0 | 5 | 3 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| 3. Vocabulary | 6 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 4 | 2 | 2 | 5 | 0 | 2 |
| 4. Posting | 2 | 2 | 2 | 0 | 3 | 2 | 7 | 5 | 0 | 1 |

| Measurable aspect | 1 | | 2 | | 3 | | 4 | | 5 | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Pre | Post | Pre | Post | Pre | Post | Pre | Post | Pre | Post |
| 5. Receiving feedback | 4 | 0 | 2 | 1 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 4 | 2 | 2 |
| 6. Giving feedback | 6 | 4 | 2 | 2 | 5 | 3 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| 7. Images | 4 | 2 | 3 | 0 | 4 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 0 | 1 |
| 8. Corrections and comments | 4 | 2 | 3 | 1 | 3 | 1 | 3 | 3 | 0 | 1 |

1= Not useful at all, 5= Very useful

As Table 2 shows, the highest division of opinions related to the usefulness of the learning features found in Busuu. When measuring the friending feature, most participants agreed: seven (50%) said that it was not useful at all in the pre-test, which increased to 60% in the post-test. Learning was not considered participatory as learners were not able to share their learning process with other students.

## 3.2. Feedback on site design

Busuu changed their outline and suspended the friending feature when making their platforms compatible with mobile devices. None of the participants could find/accept friends. Therefore, knowledge was individually rather than socially constructed, as there were no peers to create a meaningful learning environment with.

Accordingly, as Table 3 shows, the highest number of very dissatisfied users, ten participants (71.4%), related to the ease of finding contacts. This increases up to 12 (85.7%) if the 'just' dissatisfied replies are included in the pre-test, and it is also the highest variable for dissatisfaction (seven out of ten participants, 70%) for the post-test. Therefore, none of the users expressed satisfaction with this aspect of the site in both cases.

Table 3.  Feedback on site design

| Measurable aspect | 1 | | 2 | | 3 | | 4 | | 5 | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Pre | Post | Pre | Post | Pre | Post | Pre | Post | Pre | Post |
| 1. Ease of finding information | 1 | 0 | 4 | 1 | 5 | 4 | 3 | 4 | 1 | 1 |
| 2. Quality of learning activities | 0 | 0 | 2 | 1 | 6 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 2 | 2 |
| 3. Ease of reading texts | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 5 | 2 | 4 | 3 | 5 | 4 |

| | | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 4. Appearance | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 4 | 2 | 5 | 3 | 5 | 4 |
| 5. Displaying speed | 2 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 5 | 1 | 4 | 7 |
| 6. Entertainment value | 0 | 0 | 2 | 1 | 6 | 3 | 5 | 4 | 1 | 2 |
| 7. Overall learning experience | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 6 | 4 | 6 | 5 | 0 | 1 |
| 8. Instructions for activities | 2 | 0 | 7 | 2 | 3 | 3 | 1 | 3 | 1 | 2 |
| 9. Ease of moving around | 3 | 1 | 6 | 2 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 3 | 1 | 2 |
| 10. Ease of finding contacts | 10 | 4 | 2 | 3 | 2 | 2 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 |

1= very dissatisfied, 5= very satisfied

## 3.3.    Pre- and post-test results

Busuu allows users to merely create a profile, upload user-generated content, and give/receive feedback to/from peers. The latter two features relate to learning development via shared activities; however, those three characteristics mean only 37.5% of the essential features every SNS should have (Boyd & Ellison, 2008; Duffy, 2011). Results in Table 4 show a comparison between the pre- and post-test results, which would confirm that with those features, Busuu currently favours individual learning instead of social learning. Only one participant (7.69%, Participant 11) did not have a positive outcome. Eight (61.54%) out of 13 participants increased their results up to 1 point. Two participants (15.38%) increased by 2 points. Another participant (7.69%) achieved 2.1 points, and the highest score was obtained by Participant 3 (7.69%), 3.1 points.

Table  4.    Pre- and post-tests results

| Participant | Pre-written | Post-written | variation | Pre-oral | Post-oral |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| pa01 | 6.6 B2 | 6.8 B2 | 0.2 | B2 | B2 |
| pa02 | 2.1 A2 | | | A2 | |
| pa03 | 1.6 A1 | 4.7 B1 | 3.1 | A1 | A1+ |
| pa04 | 3.5 A2 | 4.9 B1 | 1.4 | A2 | A2+ |
| pa05 | 2.0 A2 | 2.4 A2 | 0.4 | A1- | A1 |
| pa06 | 1.4 A1 | 2 | 0.6 | A1- | A1- |
| pa07 | 5.3 B1 | 7.4 | 2.1 | B1 | B1 |
| pa08 | 2.1 A2 | 2.9 A2 | 0.8 | A1 | A1 |

| pa09 | 1.7 A1 | 2.2 A2 | 0.5 | A1 | A1+ |
| pa10 | 3.9 A2 | 4.3 B1 | 0.4 | A2+ | A2+ |
| pa11 | 2.7 A2 | 1.4 A1 | -1.3 | A1 | A1 |
| pa12 | 7.4 B2 | 9.2 C1 | 1.5 | B2+ | C1 |
| pa13 | 4.4 B1 | 5.3 B1 | 0.9 | B1 | B1 |
| pa14 | 3.7 A2 | 4.3 B1 | 0.6 | A1+ | A1+ |

In contrast, the results of the oral tests were not as positive. The evolution in all cases was minimal. None of the participants could advance a complete level, and four out of six participants (66.6%) who stayed on the same oral level, pointed at the lack of native speakers to practise with as the reason for it.

## 3.4.    The social aspect of Busuu

Participants did not have the opportunity to achieve useful knowledge through significant activities as Busuu did not provide the opportunities to interact with others. When asked for the reasons why participants would return to the site or why they would recommend it or not, the viewpoints varied between two extremes. One could be synthesised by what Participant 14 said: "It is a great app. Although I can only see it as an additional feature. You still need to speak to people and use books". On the other hand, we could find what Participant 3 affirmed: "This is supposed to be a social network site to help improve my Spanish. I never found anyone ever that I could connect with".

When asked about what they disliked, 12 out of 14 (85.71%) mentioned the difficulty of navigating the site, and six of those 12 (50%) specifically pointed at the impossibility of contacting other users. In the post-trial questionnaire, when asked about what they liked least, six out of nine participants (66.6%) mentioned not being able to find "friends". Five (55.5%) complained about the site not being user-friendly enough, and three (33.3%) about the grammar contents: not sufficient, not clear enough, or difficult to go back to it when needed. Furthermore, eight out of 14 (57.14%) recommended improvements to its social dimension; Participant 12 suggested that "the social aspect of the network should be implemented".

## 3.5.     General perception of the site

As learners do not have the opportunity to create a community of learning, it is difficult for users to drive their own process of learning in SNSs. When asked about the likelihood to return to the site on their own (Table 5), in the pre-test, out of 14 total participants, ten (71.4%) declared they would, while two (14.3%) had some doubts, and a further two (14.3%) were neutral. It is important to highlight that none of the participants said that they would not do it; however, this was due to their commitment to take part in the research, as some of them explained. In the post-test, out of ten total participants, those figures decreased to seven participants (70%) saying that they would return, while the other three (30%) had some doubts.

Accordingly, when asked if they would recommend Busuu to other users to learn Spanish (Table 5), in the pre-test, six participants (42.9%) expressed neutrality in their opinion. Interestingly, five participants (35.7%) said they would not do it, and three others (21.4%) affirmed they would. Figures varied in the post-test: six out of ten participants (60%) still declared neutrality, two (20%) said they would not recommend it, and two (20%) agreed with supporting the site.

Table 5.    General perception of the site

| Possibilities | 1 | | 2 | | 3 | | 4 | | 5 | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Pre | Post | Pre | Post | Pre | Post | Pre | Post | Pre | Post |
| 1. Return to the site | 0 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 2 | 3 | 7 | 6 | 3 | 1 |
| 2. Recommend the site | 2 | 1 | 3 | 1 | 6 | 6 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 0 |

1= completely disagree, 5= completely agree

# 4.     Conclusions

Although this study has a number of limitations, including the small number of participants, it shows that Busuu facilitates only three out of the eight social aspects every SNS should have. Currently, users only can create a profile, upload

user-generated content, and receive feedback from other users, which is not enough for networking and practising the four basic skills of a language.

Busuu's status quo is regressive. It contradicts the 21st-century educational paradigm shift concluded by Wang and Vásquez (2012). It has moved backwards from social to cognitive orientation, from participation to an acquisition metaphor, from L2 use to L2 learning. This backwards shift goes against the fundamental attributes of Web 2.0 technology, such as ease of participation, communication, information sharing, and collaboration (Sturm, Kennell, McBride, & Kelly, 2009). To fulfil its potential as an SNSLL, Busuu should re-implement the social aspects it had.

Therefore, the pre- and post-test variation results of this study particularly contradict Vesselinov and Grego's (2016) stance, according to which Busuu users would need 22.5 hours of study to cover the requirements for one college semester of Spanish as a foreign language.

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