

Busuu–The Mobile App

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Introduction

Technological innovations are changing the second language teaching and learning landscape (Stanley, 2013; Walker & White, 2013; Wang & Winstead, 2016). It would not be far from the truth to say that nowadays every type of language teaching has had its own technologies to support it. Moreover, thanks to technology, language learners have a variety of creative resources and authentic materials at their disposal that can assist them with the process of acquiring a new language. Among the technological innovations, mobile and hand-held devices such as smartphones, tablet computers, laptops, MP3 and MP4 players, iPads, etc. are of particular interest to second learners because they offer learners the possibility to study anytime, anywhere and at their own pace (Geddes, 2004; Wang, & Heffernan, 2009). In fact, mobile assisted language learning (MALL), a subset of M(mobile)-learning, is a rapidly flourishing field of research with important implications for second language learning (Ballance, 2012; Chinnery, 2006; Kukul-ska-Hulme & Shield, 2008). There are many studies showing the positive effects of using mobile technology on second language (L2) learning outcome as well as L2 learners' perception and attitudes (see Burston, 2013 for a review). One remarkable implication is that MALL has blurred the traditional boundary between the classroom and the outside world, allowing language teachers and learners to exploit opportunities for language practice outside of the classroom. There are now many mobile language learning applications (e.g., *Busuu*, *Babbel*, *Duolingo*, *FluentU*, *Memrise*...) that offer learners the opportunity to learning a new language independently and in a personalized manner. These applications, however, have been developed by people outside of the field of second language pedagogy and their effectiveness cannot and should not be taken for granted. This paper focuses on one such mobile language learning application, *Busuu*, and explores the possibilities the application offers for learning a second language.

Busuu: Basic Details

Publisher: Busuu Online S.L.

Product Type: Mobile Application Software

Language(s): Multilingual

Level: Any

Media Format: APK/IPA

Operating Systems: Android/iOS

Hardware Requirements: Smart Phone/Internet Connection

Supplementary Software: None

Price: Free

Busuu: A Detailed Description

To be able to use the *Busuu* phone application (there is also a web version of this app) users must download the application from Google Play/iTunes and install it on their Android or IOS devices. The first thing you see when you open this app is the logo of the app: *Busuu* – the language learning community. According to the *Busuu* website, the app has “60 million users worldwide”. The word “Busuu,” the website says, is the name of an exotic language: “Busuu takes its name from the language Busuu which, according to an ethnological study conducted in the 80’s, is spoken by a small community of only eight people in the North of Cameroon” What the slogan of the app suggests is that it provides a real *community* of speakers and language learners. That is a big claim that not many language learning applications have lived up to.

Another promise that *Busuu* makes us is that its users will acquire the four language skills (i.e., reading, speaking, writing and listening) and the components that make up the skills (i.e., vocabulary and grammar) through the application. One might ask the question: Can students truly gain competence through a mobile app, particularly competence in speaking and writing skills? And to top off these concerns, the application uses L1 to promote L2. This can cause problems. We will see if *Busuu* can hold up to its claims.

Users have a choice to either create a new profile in the application, or to link their existing Facebook or Google accounts to the app and log in to get started (See Figure 1).



Figure 1: Busuu login page

After that, users are presented with a variety of languages that they can choose to practice; users can choose a course in the English, French, Spanish, German, Italian, Japanese, Russian, Chinese, Portuguese, Polish, Turkish or Arabic (See Figure 2). With twelve languages to choose from, the app is behind in the range of languages it supports from some other language learning apps; for example, *Duolingo*, which provides sixteen courses for English speakers, and many other courses specially designed for other language backgrounds. Now the general assumption is that people from these twelve language groups can learn an L2 through their L1. Learners of languages outside of these groups should either know an L2 to learn English through, or take a much more difficult but perhaps more rewarding road of learning the foreign language through itself; that is to learn the English language through English. While many teaching methods of today criticize the learning of an L2 through the L1, for beginners it might be a good way to start off.



Figure 2: Busuu language selection page

On the top of the lessons page there is the very interesting sentence of “22.5 hours of *Busuu* premium= 1 college semester of language study” under which there is a button that users can press to go to the premium membership option (See Figure 3). Premium members of *Busuu* have access to flashcards, writing exercises, corrections from native speakers, travel course, mobile apps with offline mode, quizzes and official certificates, grammar exercises, vocabulary trainer, change language, and basically, more lessons, more exposure. The free version of *Busuu*, according to its website, offers flashcards, writing exercises, and corrections from native speakers. This review will not address the premium features of the app.

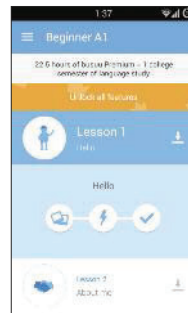


Figure 3: *Busuu* lessons page

In the lessons page, we have a choice of moving through the lessons one by one as arranged by the app, or to manually choose which ones to work on and which to skip--a great feature of *Busuu* (See Figure 4). The lessons start from an A1 level (Breakthrough or Beginner), and continue on through four standard levels up to the B2 level (Upper Intermediate) with each level consisting of between twelve to twenty-eight lessons. It is fair to say the overall design and arrangement of the lessons page is inviting; with bright colors and well-made graphical pictures. Let's see how the lessons hold up to the standards placed in our minds by the apps claims and design.

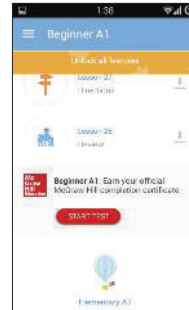


Figure 4: Busuu lessons page

Throughout the lessons, we are presented with colorful and meaningful flashcards of vocabulary completed with voice recordings of the words, with their meanings written in L1 (See Figure 5). Grammar is also presented to users which could be considered as an advantage of *Busuu* in comparison with many other similar apps which do not attend to grammar (e.g. *Duolingo* or *Memrise*). By finishing each part of a lesson, we are presented by a very cute triumphant graphic that shows how well we have done, to add a touch of empathy towards new learners who probably feel like they have begun an up-hill journey; this image will probably act as a tourniquet later on.

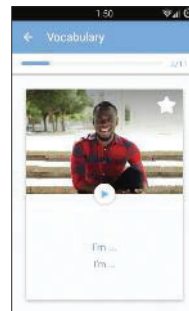


Figure 5: *Busuu* flashcards

We see true or false, fill-in-the-blank, arrange-the-sentence, record your voice, and grammar exercises throughout the lessons. The application uses soundtracks to enthruse users in the exercises. Correct answers to questions get a “Ding” of approval and wrong answers get a lower “wa-wa” sound. This feature gives the application a fun game-like air that could engage learners by its effects.

Perhaps one of the best features of *Busuu* is its writing exercises, in which users get to communicate through writing, and have other users of *Busuu* correct

their sentences (See Figures 6 & 7). It is in this feature which *Busuu*'s claim of being a community could be met. Learners can help each other in the difficult process of learning a foreign language, and through correcting other users' mistakes, learn about their own faults as well. This kind of feature can definitely hook some users for they will be pushed to better their skills to be able to better help other learners, or have fewer mistakes.

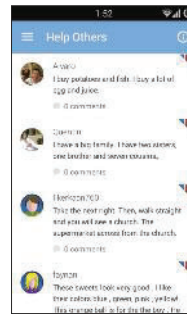


Figure 6: *Busuu* Help Others page

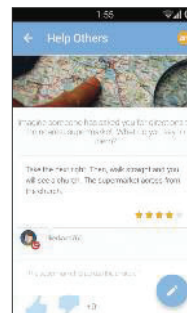


Figure 7: *Busuu* Help Others page

Conversation exercises matched with native voice recordings reading the lines to us, is also a huge advantage of *Busuu*. The native recordings are not robotic and void-of-life, as we see in some other language instruction apps (See Figure 8).

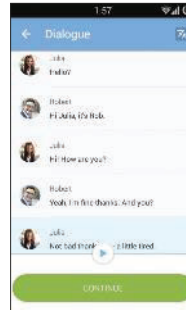


Figure 8: *Busuu* conversation models

Another fun feature of *Busuu* is that it uses a reminder system that invites users to review and complete their daily tasks. As a push for its users, *Busuu* uses statements such as: “Do you remember what wrong means?” This method both acts as a very brief but better-than-nothing review of what the user has learned so far, and as a nudge towards clicking on the app to keep going up the hill of foreign language learning.

A good revision tool that the app uses is the My Vocabulary panel (See Figure 9), in which learners can quickly reach and revise their vocabulary bank to catch up on lost time. In this panel learners can find the meaning of the vocabulary partnered with example sentences, and the audio of the pronunciation of the words.

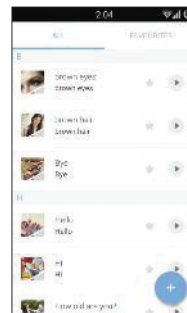


Figure 9: *Busuu* My Vocabulary panel

One extremely annoying aspect of the *Busuu* app is that it continuously flashes users with advertisements for its premium version. Surely, most users understand that the premium version offers more. Showing ads in users' faces every time they open the app or want to start a new lesson is definitely irritating.

Another negative aspect of the free version is that users cannot use the app offline. Many learners may not at all times have access to the Internet connection but still want to use the application. Some language learning apps do provide users with an offline version that they can use whenever they feel the need to revise or progress in their learning journey.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that *Busuu* provides well-crafted learning tools such as flashcards, conversation models, correction by native speakers, and grammar extracts for its users; it also creates a living community with its Help Others feature. All in all, the application does in fact exercise users' reading, writing, speaking and listening skills through its concentrated and well-formed exercises. However, the free version will help learners less in those aspects. In comparison with other free popular applications for language learning, the huge downside of *Busuu* (free version) is the small variety of exercises that it offers; simply stated, it gets boring after a while and learners may lose interest in continuing using the application. At the end of the day, the free version is just not appealing enough for most users to want to go premium. As much as the "community" *Busuu* provides is attractive on paper, it will not probably do for placing *Busuu* on the top of users' lists in deciding on a language learning application.

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