[Review]

The Usefulness of Busuu Online Courses for Foreign Language Learning

Naoya Shibata (nshibata@nufs.ac.jp)
Nagoya University of Foreign Studies, Japan

Among a significant number of online foreign language learning websites and phone applications, Busuu offers language learning courses in 12 languages, including English, Spanish, French, and German. More than 100 million people worldwide use the service. Busuu also works with McGraw-Hill Education, Google, the Economist, Microsoft, and other notable global companies and organisations (Busuu, 2020). Nevertheless, these companies are not research institutions relevant to the second language acquisition and teaching fields. In order to delve into the effectiveness of online language learning courses, various perspectives, including target language learners, learning contexts, activities, and assessment tasks, need to be explored (Kern, Ware, & Warschauer, 2016). Hence, it is essential to reconsider the usefulness of Busuu online courses, especially concerning learning goals, course content and activities, and language assessment, from the second language acquisition theoretical perspectives.

The Specific Context

Busuu does not explicitly target specific ages or contexts of language learners through its online courses on mobile devices. Users select target languages to learn and set their learning speeds based on their interests and learning goals. There is a total of four levels of language courses: (1) beginner, (2) elementary, (3) low-intermediate, and (4) upper-intermediate. Advanced-level learners are not targeted in Busuu online language learning courses. However, users can still start their language learning based on their target language proficiency and learning speed. This programme's availability and flexibility enable users, regardless of their age, to take their online courses anywhere and anytime as long as they

have internet access. Therefore, these two features could be perceived as a possible strength of Busuu for users.

Busuu provides users with options to take online language learning courses for free or with subscriptions, and additional activities are provided in the subscription plans. Therefore, it seems that Busuu aims to target consumers who can afford to pay money in order to take their subscription course activities. In the free plan, learners can learn only one language while taking limited vocabulary learning and listening course activities. On the other hand, subscription plans enable users to choose more than two languages, and they can engage in further online activities of reading, speaking, and writing. In addition to these advantages, learners can receive feedback on their writing and speaking from speakers of the target languages. Users with paid online courses have more opportunities to use the target language and improve their language abilities. Accordingly, in order to evaluate the usefulness of Busuu language learning courses deeply, it is vital to reflect upon all activities and assessment tasks in both free and subscription plans.

Learning Goals

Busuu (2020) mentions that their language learning courses aim to help users to develop fluency of all of their target language abilities to listen, read, speak, and write. In addition to these four language skills, their courses attempt to help learners to improve their vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation. In order to accomplish these learning goals, Busuu offers online language learning courses based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), which is one of the most prevalent criteria for evaluating language proficiency worldwide, and provides courses with a total of four CEFR levels of A1 (Beginner), A2 (Elementary), B1 (Intermediate), and B2 (Upper-Intermediate). The description of each level can help users to make clear learning goals. Busuu users can write their language objectives through online questionnaires with multiple-choice questions. Based on the answers, Busuu recommends especially for subscribed users some learning plans to follow. Users can reflect upon and track their language learning through weekly progress reports. It seems that these systems can help learners to have explicit learning objectives and maintain the motivation to learn the target languages. It might enable them to envision the ideal L2-self, whom the learner wishes to become in the future using the target

language (Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015), and therefore keep their motivation sufficiently high to learn the target language and develop their language skills.

However, each individual's learning goals do not necessarily match the descriptions of each CEFR level. Furthermore, the descriptions of CEFR are holistic; the criteria to evaluate learners' language performance on tasks are based on an overall level of ability and quality in a single rating (Carr, 2011). It might be difficult for learners to judge whether they developed their target language abilities sufficiently enough to use the language in specific situations after they finish each course activity and pass summative course tests. Therefore, it would be necessary to examine course content and activities as well as assignment methods in order to judge whether the learning goals Busuu sets are reasonable and appropriate.

Learning Content and Activities

Topic-based lessons (TBL) are utilised in Busuu online courses. TBL in this specific context seems to be based on a theme-based model of content-based instruction (TB-CBI), a language-driven programme of CBI which integrate the target language with themes and topics relevant and familiar to learners in order to help them to develop their language abilities (Lyster, 2018). TB-CBI can be implemented into any language proficiency level of classes (Brinton & Snow, 2017). When users create their accounts, they can select topics to study based on the user's target language proficiency and their learning objectives. Nonetheless, as all of the topics are designed based on CEFR, the topic familiarity and vocabulary difficulty can vary depending on the course levels. For example, how to order food and beverage at cafés and bars, and self-introductions are offered in beginner and elementary levels as they are relevant to daily lives. In contrast, topics with business purposes and social issues, including economic depression and environmental issues, are covered in addition to daily topics in intermediate and upper-intermediate levels. Therefore, although the topics offered in the Busuu courses seem to be relevant and helpful for users, they might encounter unfamiliar and challenging topics as they progress through course levels.

Computers are useful, practical tools to deliver recursive mechanical drills for practice, especially for grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, and listening (Sokolik, 2014). Most of the fundamental activities in Busuu online course are mechanical drills using flashcards and dictations to learn a small number of vocabulary and grammar points. Users

can recursively listen to target words and provided scripts in order to complete tasks, and the same questions are provided until they get all the answers correct. These activities are based on behaviourism, which is expected to help people to form appropriate behaviour through rote learning (Beatty, 2010). Through taking repetitive mechanical drills and memorising the target vocabulary and grammar, learners are expected to develop their language abilities and modify their behaviour in order to use the target language appropriately. However, as Beatty (2010) highlights, "[t]he control of sequence or program is usually with the program, not the learner" (p. 98). Furthermore, as language acquisition, in general, has various complex factors, repetitive online activities based on behaviourism might not have a noticeable influence on learners' development of practical language proficiency. Therefore, this basic structure of online courses might be helpful for language teachers to assign as additional tasks to their students outside classes, but less useful for learners to improve their overall language abilities.

Based on sociocultural theoretical perspectives, learners need many opportunities to interact with others to negotiate for meaning and develop their language abilities because language learning and language development occur between individuals in social collaboration (Vygotsky, 1986/2012). While negotiating for meaning and collaborating with others to complete tasks, learners can reach their zone of proximal development (ZPD) and scaffold each other's learning (Gibbons, 2015). In addition to recursive mechanical drilling activities, subscribed users of Busuu can complete short writing activities and speaking activities regarding target themes. For these 'authentic' activities, learners can receive feedback on their writing and speaking from speakers of target languages. This system might appear to be collaborative and helpful for users to improve their language abilities. Learners can reflect upon their utterances and sentences and realise possible reasons why they made spelling or grammatical mistakes based on the feedback. Thus, they might be able to review the target course content to deepen their understanding of the grammatical rule and expressions by themselves. However, no opportunities are provided for learners to negotiate for meaning and ask feedback providers any additional questions to develop their understanding. It is a one-sided system, and no collaboration between the learner and the feedback-provider occur. Based on these shortcomings, it would be difficult to negotiate for meaning between the learner and the assessor and scaffold each other's learning to develop the target language abilities collaboratively using the Busuu system.

Language Assessment

Busuu online courses offer formative and summative tests of vocabulary, grammar, reading, and listening for free learning plans and additional course tests of writing and speaking in subscription plans. The usefulness of language assessment in these language learning courses can be evaluated based on the six characteristics of language assessment that Bachman and Palmer (1996) introduce: construct validity, reliability, authenticity, practicality, impact, and interactivity.

If users subscribe to the learning plans, they can receive feedback on their writing and speaking concerning assigned topics from speakers of target languages in addition to multiple-choice and dictation test tasks of vocabulary, grammar, listening, and reading. Multiple-choice and dictation tests have one specific answer, so high reliability of scoring is assured. However, noticeable problems for writing and speaking tests are that all speakers of target languages are also users of Busuu, and neither official assessor training nor rubrics for specific assessment tasks are provided. Therefore, interrater and intrarater reliability of assessors could be noticeably problematic because assessors may evaluate users' performance subjectively, mainly depending on where they are from in the world. This situation also results in low language assessment validity because reliability is a prerequisite for validity (Brown, 2005).

As the course provides learners with topics familiar and relevant in their daily lives and learning objectives, assessment tasks should be authentic and interactive in order to assess learners' learning outcomes and performance. However, users with free course plans can only take dictation tests and vocabulary tests, both of which are multiple-choice tasks or changing orders tasks. Furthermore, although users with subscription plans can take writing and speaking assessments regarding target themes, all tasks consist of short-answer questions, and no opportunities to negotiate for meaning are provided. Thus, course assessment tasks do not have high authenticity or interactivity.

In terms of practicality and impact, subscribed users can take four summative tests of beginner, elementary, intermediate, and upper-intermediate level, and these tests are certified by the publisher McGraw-Hill Education. Certified test tasks consist of multiple-choice items and matching questions and can be evaluated based on reliable evaluation criteria with computer automated scoring. Therefore, it does not take a long time to mark answers, and thus the practicality seems to be high. Furthermore, as the tests are certified by a well-known

language teaching and learning institution, the impact of the test can be high because test takers can utilise the certificate to display their target language abilities when they would like to apply for jobs or academic institutions.

Conclusion

Since computer and technology-assisted language learning is based on many second language acquisition theories and classroom activities, various pedagogical theories are integrated into online language learning courses and activities (Sokoik, 2014). Furthermore, Sokoik (2014) maintains that more authentic and interactive activities are being included as the technology advances even though the audiolingual approach and grammar-based methods had a prominent role in computer-assisted language learning activities when the technology was in development. Most of the activities in Busuu, however, still seem to be based on the theoretical perspectives of behaviourism due to the noticeable number of audiolingual activities and repetitive mechanical drills. A lack of application of sociocultural theoretical perspectives, especially opportunities to collaborate and negotiate meaning with others, needs to be reconsidered and addressed to improve the effectiveness of Busuu courses.

Language learning activities and the usefulness of assessment in Busuu also seem to have some issues, including repetitive mechanical drilling activities, low inter-rater and intra-rater reliability, and lack of authenticity and interactivity. In order to provide current and future users with opportunities to help them to develop their target language abilities more effectively, Busuu would need to revise course activities and language assessment methods based on recent second language acquisition theoretical perspectives. As Gibbons (2015) and Vygotsky (1986/2012) emphasise the importance of collaboration between learners and negotiation of meaning in social activities in order to reach their ZPD, Busuu might need to improve the accessibility for users to communicate with others in the target language and course activities to facilitate collaborations between users through online chats. In addition to this, more reliable evaluation criteria and assessor training are required in order to offer more useful feedback for learners on their writing and speaking.

References

Bachman, L. F., & Palmer, A. S. (1996). *Language testing in practice: Designing and developing useful language tests*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Beatty, K. (2010). *Teaching and researching computer-assisted language learning* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Routledge.

Brinton, D. M., & Snow, M. A. (2017). The evolving architecture of content-based instruction. In M. A. Snow & D. M. Brinton (Eds.). *The content-based classroom: New perspectives on integrating language and content* (2nd ed., pp. 2–20). Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.

Brown, J. D. (2005). *Testing in language programs: A comprehensive guide to English language assessment.* New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.

Busuu. (2020). https://www.busuu.com/en

Carr, N. T. (2011). *Designing and analyzing language tests*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Dörnyei, Z., & Ryan, S. (2015). *The psychology of the language learner revisited*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Gibbons, P. (2015). *Scaffolding language scaffolding learning: Teaching English language learners in the mainstream classroom* (2nd ed.). Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Kern, R., Ware, P., & Warschauer, M. (2016). Computer-mediated communication and language learning. In G. Hall (Ed.). *The Routledge handbook of English language teaching* (pp. 542–555). New York, NY: Routledge.

Lyster, R. (2018). *Content-based language teaching*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Sokolik, M. (2014). Digital technology in language teaching. In M. Celce-Murcia, D. M. Brinton, & M. A. Snow (Eds.). *Teaching English as a second or foreign language* (4th ed., pp. 409–421). Boston, MA: Henle Cengage Learning.

Vygotsky, L. (2012). *Thought and language: Revised and expanded edition.* (A. Kozulin, Ed and Trans). Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press. (Original work published 1986)