

The busuu Efficacy Study

Executive Summary

New York/London, May, 2016



Context

At busuu we are confident that our methodology helps people learn to speak a new language, but we wanted to prove this through an academic efficacy study.

We decided to work with an independent research team in the US, who had previously conducted efficacy studies into Rosetta Stone¹ and Duolingo², among other language learning software providers. The research team consisted of [Roumen Vesselinov](#), PhD, from City University New York and [John Grego](#), PhD, from the University of South Carolina.

Methodology

- The study ran for two months from February to April 2016.
- It focused on 144 Beginner-level Spanish learners in London and New York.
- They all studied with only busuu for at least two hours per week for eight weeks.
- They sat standardised entry and exit tests: [WebCAPE](#), which measures written proficiency, and [OPIc](#), which measures oral proficiency.
- Participants' time online was tracked for the whole study.

At the end of the eight-week study period, participants who had spent enough time on busuu were invited to take the exit tests. Those who had studied for more than two hours took the written test only and those who had studied for more than 16 hours took both the written and oral tests. Participants also answered a questionnaire. Any students who had used methods other than busuu to study had their results excluded from the final outcomes.

Outcomes

- 84% of participants who sat the written test improved their result. Of those, 42% improved by the equivalent of one full college semester of Spanish or more. 10% moved up by the equivalent of 2 college semesters and 6% by 3 semesters.
- 75% of participants who sat the oral test improved their result by one level or more.
- Of those who studied for 16 hours or more on busuu, 100% made a significant improvement to either their written test result, oral test result or both.
- 100% of those who answered the exit survey said that they would continue to use busuu after the study ended.
- Participants gave busuu an average net promoter score (NPS) of +8.4.

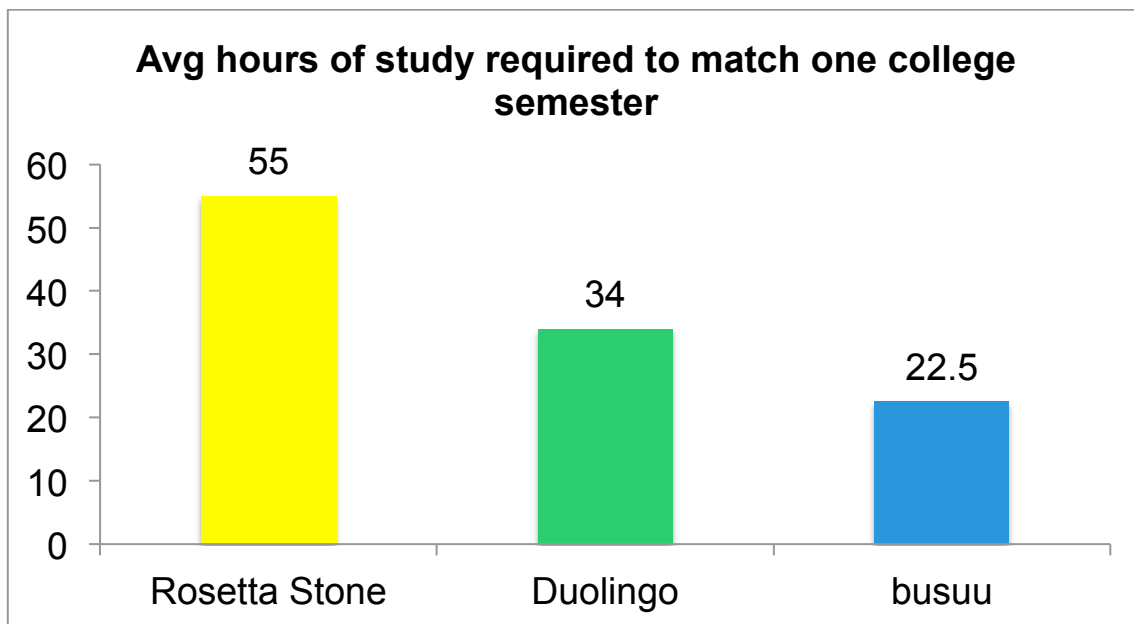
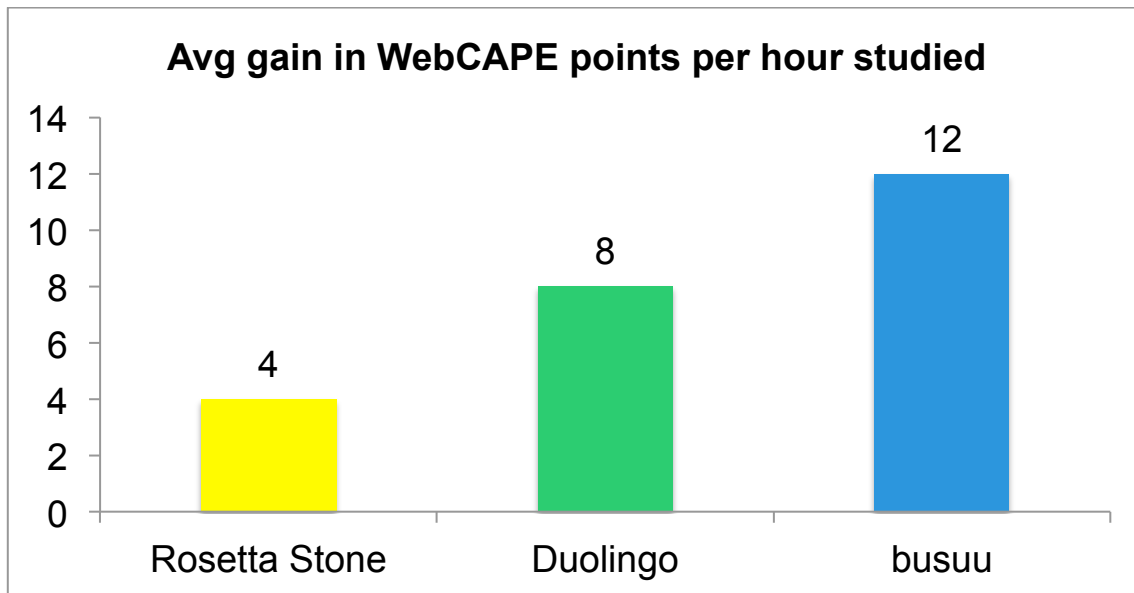
¹ Rosetta Stone Efficacy Study (using self-reported study time):

http://resources.rosettastone.com/CDN/us/pdfs/Measuring_the_Effectiveness_RS-5.pdf

² Duolingo Efficacy Study: <https://s3.amazonaws.com/duolingo-papers/other/vesselinov-gregg.duolingo12.pdf>

Comparison with other language learning providers

Compared to other language learning providers that conducted similar efficacy studies, busuu achieved by far the best results for its students. Roumen Vesselinov, PhD, from City University New York stated: **“Among all the language learning apps studied so far, the efficacy of busuu is the best.”**



On a per hour basis, busuu achieved 3x better test results than Rosetta Stone users and 50% better test results than Duolingo users on the standardized WebCAPE test.

busuu

The language learning community



The busuu Methodology: White Paper

January 2016

Kirsten Campbell-Howes, Head of Education

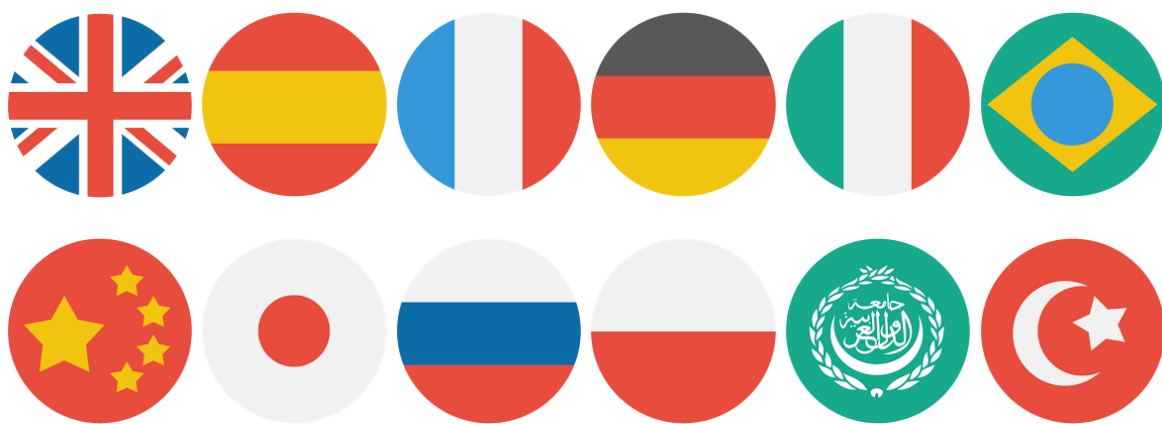
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What is busuu?

busuu is the world's largest social network for language learning. As of January 2016 busuu's community numbers over 60 million language learners, with up to 100,000 new learners joining every day.

busuu students can learn 12 different languages on web and mobile, using busuu's unique combination of self-paced language courses and active social network for practicing the languages they learn.



The 12 languages available on busuu: English, Spanish, French, German, Italian, Portuguese, Chinese, Japanese, Russian, Polish, Arabic and Turkish

How is busuu different from other language learning apps?

busuu is designed to provide a **complete** self-study and language practice environment. busuu's courses are developed by language experts with many years of classroom teaching experience who bring the best principles from communicative classroom teaching into their course design. Some of the key features include:

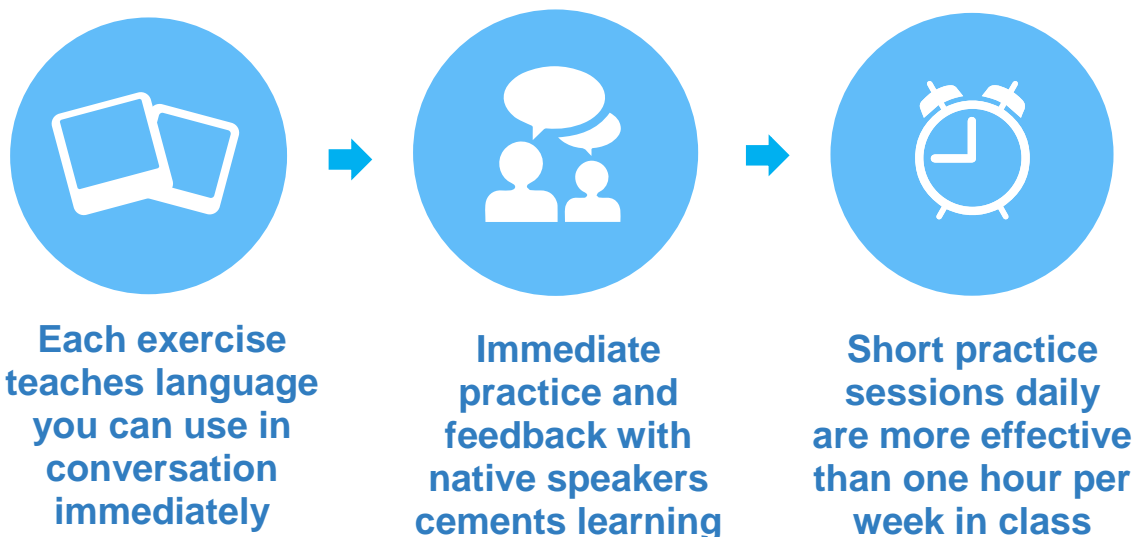
- Interactive vocabulary and grammar lessons with audio, translation and multiple practice exercises
- Audio recordings of each vocabulary item, plus example sentences and dialogues to place vocabulary and grammar in context
- Voice recording exercises to drill pronunciation and allow students to insert their voice into a dialogue and get feedback from native speakers
- Translations of key vocabulary, instructions and grammar tips into twelve languages
- Writing exercises which receive instant corrections from native speakers in the busuu community
- busuu-talk (web only) which allows students to find language partners and practice speaking or text chatting with them

What is the busuu methodology?

The busuu methodology is broadly communicative, and based on how language is taught successfully in classrooms. The focus of each exercise within a course is to give the student something new (usually a word or a phrase) that they can use immediately in writing or conversation.

Each lesson is grouped around a particular communicative focus (for example: introducing yourself, describing your hometown, ordering food in a restaurant). Each unit within a lesson is designed to teach useful language in chunks (phrases and sentences) that the student can then practice reproducing in both controlled and free practice activities.

Controlled practice activities include gap fills, multiple choice questions, dictation and sentence reordering activities. Free practice includes writing exercises (which are corrected by native speaking members of the community) and the busuu-talk feature on web, which allows students to text, audio and video chat with language partners from the community.



What does the busuu syllabus cover?

The majority of language learners who come to busuu are either A1 and A2 level according to the Common European Framework of Reference. At busuu the aim is to bring students from A-level to upper B2 level, where they will be close to becoming proficient users¹ of the language they are learning.

Courses contain approximately 61 lessons, and up to 340 units. Each lesson contains vocabulary and grammar units, including dialogues to show the new language in context. Vocabulary lessons are designed to include the most high frequency words in each language, reflecting research that the most common words in a language make up around

¹ http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/Cadre1_en.asp

80% of all spoken and written material.² Each lesson also includes writing and voice recording exercises which are corrected by the native speaker community. Additionally, lessons contain a mixture of supplementary learning material such as video or media units featuring real life content from, e.g. *National Geographic*. busuu is constantly developing new content partnerships with providers of real world language materials, in recognition of the fact that learners want to practice with the types of materials they encounter outside of the ‘unreal’ environments of the classroom or textbook.

Can busuu supplement my classroom teaching?

Yes. busuu works well as a standalone language course or as a supplementary resource for language students who are already part of a university or private language school program. There are three main ways to use busuu to supplement your language teaching:

1. Additional vocabulary and grammar practice
2. Writing practice with native speaker corrections
3. Finding language partners or penpals for additional speaking or writing practice

Teachers wishing to track their students’ progress on busuu can subscribe to reporting features, which are emailed weekly and customised to include desired information such as time spent online, number and type of activities completed, time of last log in, and so on.

Case Study: College Students in Hungary



BUDAPEST BUSINESS SCHOOL
FOREIGN LANGUAGE EXAMINATION
AND TRAINING CENTRE



An independent research study conducted at the Budapest Business College (the biggest college in Hungary) found a statistically significant improvement in language abilities for those students who supplemented their classroom-based language courses with short periods of time on the busuu app over a period of two months. By comparison, students in the control group (who did not have access to busuu) experienced a drop in performance in the post-study tests, indicating that busuu is useful as a tool to aid memorisation and retention of language study material.

Students who took part reported that they found busuu useful for: “vocabulary acquisition and pronunciation, chatting with native speakers, getting corrections and feedback on writing tasks, and flexible and short learning time.”

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² O’Keefe, A., et al (2007)

³ Kétyi, A., (2014)

What is the busuu approach to skills?

busuu's course designers have been careful to cover all the skills necessary for students to achieve fluency in communication. Many language courses focus purely on one skill, such as vocabulary acquisition, or tend to over-focus on the so-called 'passive' skills, such as reading, to the detriment of other skills.⁴ busuu aims for all its students to achieve a balance between all skills, using the following methods.

busuu: skills			
Listening	Reading	Speaking	Writing
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Native speaker audio for all key words Dialogues Video content Weekly new media content 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Word and phrase recognition Video and dialogue transcripts Weekly new media content Writing exercise correction busuu-talk with native speakers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Voice recording Dialogue activities busuu-talk audio and video chat with native speakers Video content with subtitles 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Typing exercises Word choice exercises Writing exercises corrected by native speakers Weekly new media writing exercises

Vocabulary	Grammar	Pronunciation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Flashcards Interactive exercises to promote retention Store your own vocab list Review your mistakes Apple Watch app 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Grammar units created by expert teachers PDF grammar summaries for every lesson Grammar tips Grammar specific exercises Verb tables & other support 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Native speaker models for every phrase Voice recording exercise with native speaker correction Voice recognition exercise

⁴ Schellekens, P. (2011)

What is the best way to use busuu?

General approaches

busuu is designed to be flexible, in recognition of the fact that not everyone can or should learn a language in the same way. However, busuu students broadly fall into three distinct categories, and guidance for each group is as follows:

1. *Students learning their first foreign language, or students learning a language which is very different from those they already speak*
Students who are less experienced at learning a foreign language, especially monolingual students, are advised to study little and often, to follow each lesson in sequence, and to complete all units within each lesson. Similarly, students learning a language very different from their own (e.g. an Italian student learning Japanese) are advised to take the same approach.
2. *Students learning a third or fourth foreign language*
Students who are already bi- or trilingual may not need to study all lessons and units in a course. For example, a French student learning Spanish will probably not need to spend much time on Spanish grammar units, and can skip some of the familiar vocabulary units. They should focus their attention on the dialogue, voice recording and writing exercises and on finding language partners to chat with on busuu-talk.
3. *Students refreshing a language they have learned before*
Many students use busuu to refresh their memories of a language they already learned some time ago. Such students are advised to dip in and out of lessons, revise the key grammar concepts and vocabulary sets they have forgotten, and to focus on finding language partners to practice with on busuu-talk.

Timing

Students are always free to cover a busuu course in the time that best suits them. Most students who graduate from a full busuu course (A1 to B2) take between 90 and 130 weeks to do so, with highly engaged students spending an average of 120-160 minutes on busuu each week.

Students are recommended to study for a minimum of **three periods of twenty minutes per week**. Students with a very regular schedule may prefer to break this down into five or more short sessions per week, whereas some may prefer to study for several longer periods per week. In general, little and often is recommended over longer, more infrequent study sessions. Research into the principles of spaced repetition indicates that returning regularly to what has been learned leads to more effective memorisation and understanding of learning materials.⁵ busuu's course designers introduce new words and grammar gradually, then ensure they are repeated at regular intervals so that students can encounter them multiple times, in different contexts. As students progress through the levels of a course, they gradually encounter more challenging vocabulary, grammar and exercises, and are expected to spend more time reviewing the language they encounter and using it in the community.

⁵ Sisti et al, (2007)

How can students stay motivated when using busuu?

It can be very difficult to stay motivated for the amount of time it takes to learn a language to fluency. In recognition of this, busuu courses are designed to maximise both intrinsic (self-directed) and extrinsic (external) sources of motivation.⁶ In particular, reward systems, feedback and social elements are optimised to increase students' feelings of autonomy, competence and relatedness.⁷

Students who engage fully with the busuu community, whether through competing to stay top of the leaderboard, correcting multiple writing exercises or engaging in regular busuu-talk sessions, report a higher degree of motivation for their language studies in general. From their observations, the busuu team has built up a manifesto for staying motivated to learn a language:

A manifesto for successful language learning:

1. Set achievable goals
2. Study with others
3. Use variety to stay motivated
4. Acknowledge that it takes time
5. Don't beat yourself up for taking a break – just keep coming back!
6. Focus on the skills you struggle with most
7. Ask for help
8. Have fun with the language you learn

⁶ Schunk, D. et al (2014)

⁷ Dornyei. Z. et al (2014)

FAQs

Which age groups can use busuu?

busuu has students from the age of 14 to 91, but the majority are aged 20-35. Feedback from busuu students indicates that busuu works well for all age groups, because it provides such a variety of ways to learn a language.

What is the linguistic aim of busuu?

busuu's aim is to empower everyone in the world to learn a language. More specifically, busuu's courses are designed to enable students to communicate in their language of choice. Students finish each lesson able to write and say something new in their chosen language.

Why should I pay for busuu when other apps are free?

busuu is the **only** language learning app which provides a complete self-study and language practice environment. Most other apps focus on one or two skills (usually vocabulary acquisition). As all language teachers know, students will never achieve fluency by focusing on just one or two skills: busuu teaches them everything they need to know and then gets them to practise the language they learned immediately, with real native speakers.

My students struggle with grammar – does busuu help them with that?

Yes. busuu's courses are designed by language experts with backgrounds in linguistics and professional language teaching. Grammar is core to busuu courses, which contain multiple grammar units with careful explanations, contextual examples and interactive practice activities to help students understand and improve their grammar quickly.

Why should I send writing exercises to the busuu community – they aren't professional language teachers.

busuu's community members are language learning enthusiasts, some of whom have corrected more than 100,000 exercises. Premium members are guaranteed to have their work corrected, and the more friends they make in the community, the more responses they get, giving them access to a wide variety of expertise. Feedback from busuu's customers indicates that they place a high value on the corrections they receive, precisely because they come from 'real' users of the language.

Why should I correct others' writing exercises?

Correcting other people's writing exercises is one of busuu's most popular activities – it is a great way to make friends in the community and users report strong feelings of satisfaction from helping others. It can provide a satisfying break when students are struggling with their own language learning, giving them the confidence and motivation to keep going, as they share in other people's learning journeys. It also provides insights into grammar, vocabulary choice and sentence construction which can be beneficial when learning additional languages.

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