Software Review: LANG-8

YOUNG SANG CHO
Dankook University

PRODUCT AT A GLANCE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Product Type</th>
<th>Language exchange social networking website</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Language</td>
<td>Any language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level</td>
<td>Beginning to advanced; adolescent to adult</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activity</td>
<td>Writing freestyle journals; giving and receiving feedback; reading others’ entries; forming social networks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media Format</td>
<td>Online</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Operating Systems</td>
<td>Windows 7 and Mac OS 10.5 or higher is recommended</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supplementary Software</td>
<td>Internet browser; valid e-mail address needed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Documentation</td>
<td>Online user’s guide on the Lang-8 blog (blog.lang-8.com)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Price</td>
<td>Free for free account; $7 per month or $63 per year for premium account</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

GENERAL DESCRIPTION

Lang-8 is a language exchange social networking site (SNS) that enables second language (L2) learners to make friends with native speakers from around the world in an online space. Active Lang-8 users usually engage in activities, such as creating a profile page, forming a network of friends, posting journal entries, and giving and receiving feedback. Through these activities, L2 learners learn their target language from L1 speakers through authentic communication and in return teach their native language(s) to others.

As the sign “8” (which vertically shifts the symbol for “infinity”) in the name Lang-8 indicates, the number of languages that could possibly be learned on this website is unlimited. A membership is free for general use (e.g., building a network of friends, posting journal entries, giving and receiving feedback, and messaging), but users can sign up for a premium account, if they want to use special learning features, such as PDF downloads of writing entries and receiving corrective feedback, or technical features like priority for corrective feedback and no advertisements.

The main medium of learning and communicating in Lang-8 is written text. Users post a journal entry in their target language and then receive feedback from native speakers who are also members. In return, the user is expected to correct journal entries of other users who are also learning a second language. Therefore, in the Lang-8 environment, members are encouraged to play both the role of a language learner and a language teacher.

Lang-8 provides an online manual for beginner users through its blog site (blog.lang-8.com). Clicking on “What is Lang-8” in the top menu bar on the homepage (see figure 1) automatically leads users to the Lang-8 blog site. The blog covers themes like “Help” and “Tips for Beginners,” which provide technical support when users face problems or have questions.
EVALUATION

**Technological Features**

Lang-8 is web-based, so it can be run on PC and Mac without any additional program installed. The website recommends Windows 7 and Mac OS 10.5 or higher as an operating system. Google Chrome is the recommended web browser, but Lang-8 also runs smoothly on other web browsers like Firefox and Microsoft’s Internet Explorer. Registration is very simple, requiring only a valid email address. When a user enters an email address, an invitation message is delivered to that email account. The user clicks on the link named “Joining 'Lang-8'” in that message and finishes the registration process by entering personal information to create his or her own profile.

User interaction is facilitated in Lang-8 through activities, such as blogging, sending friend requests, messaging, and sharing photos, activities which are commonly seen in typical SNSs. However, there are also technological differences. First, Lang-8 does not have chatting and file or music sharing features. Second, it does not provide a feature that most SNSs have: automatic proposal of possible friends based on the recommendation of others (Halvorsen, 2009). Instead, it automatically proposes possible friends according to mutual language interests. For example, the system provides a list of “My Language Matches” (native speakers of a user’s target language who are learning the user’s native language) and a list of other members’ writing entries waiting for the user’s corrections regardless of their native language. Third, Lang-8 supports fewer multimodal ways of communication than other SNSs do. It mostly relies on two communication modes: visual (e.g., photos) and textual (e.g., written journals, comments, and emails).

Lang-8 is similar to other well-known online language learning websites like Livemocha (www.livemocha.com) and Palabea (www.palabea.com), but has some important differences. For example, Livemocha forms a community within which L2 learners gather together to learn, but its members may stay passive in their learning because they learn L2s by taking courses created and structured by someone else. By contrast, learners in the
Lang-8 community take a more active role in that they create their own learning content through free-style writing and peer feedback. Palabea is also similar to Lang-8 because both provide a platform in which learners practice L2s with native speakers as they discuss topics of interest to both. However, learning and networking activities on Palabea are mostly speaking-focused and topic-oriented, whereas learning and networking activities on Lang-8 are writing-focused and people-oriented.

Writing and posting entries is straightforward: Users simply click on the “Write a new entry” button on their home page and post it by clicking on the “Publish” button (see Figure 2). Users can also easily leave feedback on their friends’ writing entries by clicking on the titles. The writing entries that friends posted are automatically listed on the user’s “Home” page in a reverse chronological order, so it makes it easy to track the friends’ most recent journal entries.

**Figure 2**
Writing and Publishing a Journal Entry

Activities on Lang-8 are social, collaborative, mutual, and facilitative. Lang-8 adopts free-style writing and feedback activities. Lang-8 members themselves create learning content. According to Harrison and Thomas (2009), users usually work on two main activities on SNSs—building a profile page and creating networks of friends—and so do Lang-8 users. First, creating a profile page is one of the few mandatory procedures in the Lang-8 sign-up process. Most information on the profile page is in short-answer format, and delivers a user’s personal information, such as a real name, nickname, nationality, age, gender, occupation, native language, and target language. However, users can also provide personal information by creating their own images, using profile pictures, and posting a written introduction in the “About me” section. The profile page functions to inform others of the user’s presence in the Lang-8 community, to format and manage images, and to introduce language backgrounds (e.g., first and target languages).
The second activity that most users try to do upon registration is to build a network of friends to learn languages with their help. As mentioned above, Lang-8 locates language exchange friends for the users. Unlike other online language exchange websites that simply provide technical support that connects L2 learners to native speakers and/or deliver pre-made language learning content to their members, Lang-8 itself is a community in which learners learn L2s together through continuous interaction and with a sense of belonging to a community. Once users find potential friends, they can send a friend request to them. A friend relationship can be created only when counterparts accept the request, so the process of being friends on Lang-8 is always mutual.

One of the unique ways to build a friend network on Lang-8 is through writing and leaving comments. Lang-8 users make friends easily as they write and exchange feedback frequently because social engagement on Lang-8 is intrinsically embedded in learning practices and vice versa. Due to the fact that users play both roles, learner and teacher, learning is reciprocal, collaborative, and facilitative.

From the perspective of language development, feedback activities mostly focus on linguistic issues that cover (but are not limited to) mechanics (e.g., spelling and punctuation), grammar, word usage, natural-sounding language, and writing styles (see Figure 3). Types and quality of feedback usually depend on the peer evaluators. For example, some users receive corrective feedback tagged with follow-up grammatical explanations about those corrections, while others receive a general response to the content of their journal entries. In addition, some corrections are made by American English speakers, but others by British or Australian English speakers.

Figure 3
Examples of Feedback

Teacher Fit (Approach)

Learning practices in the Lang-8 environment are rooted in sociocultural theories (e.g., Bakhtin, 1986; Vygotsky, 1978; Lantolf, 2000) in general and the community of practice framework (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002) in particular. Language learning in Lang-8 takes place for, by, and with a group of language exchange partners. Through genuine interactions with Lang-8 members, language learning becomes
not only a process of acquiring linguistic knowledge and skills but also an essential part of the social participation process in an L2 community. Learning efforts in a new language are not detachable from the process of friend finding and maintaining activities and vice versa. The system promotes an atmosphere in which L2s are learned and used as a “mediational tool” by which users substantially control both of their L2-related social worlds (e.g., relationships with Lang-8 friends) and their L2-related psychological worlds (e.g., constructing and managing their images through profile and writing activities) (Vygotsky, 1978).

The practice of writing within the Lang-8 community benefits learners in many ways. First, Lang-8 adopts a free writing style (journal writing) as its main learning practice. This allows learners to explore their ideas, thoughts, experiences, and feelings with a minimum of constraint of format and content of writing. According to Nystrand and Gamoran (1991), journal writing is “substantively engaging” because learners basically write about what interests them. Lang-8 users also benefit from the presence of a real audience. Learners write in their target language not just for the sake of language practice, but for authentic communication. People in the Lang-8 community are real; thus, learners write with an authentic audience in mind: the entire Lang-8 community in general and their Lang-8 friends in particular.

As mentioned earlier, learners and their friends co-construct their own content and contexts. Language learning content (e.g., word usage, expressions, grammar, and structures) is implicit in journal entries and eventually comes to the surface through peer feedback. Therefore, content is user-customized and interactive. In addition, potential learning materials are contextualized in each learner’s personal stories so they are relevant and authentic to learners.

Classroom teachers can use this website to cultivate opportunities for students to interact with native speakers with whom they can easily identify. The website also allows teachers to situate L2 learning in real communication situations and to build L2 communities that are filled with possibly long-lasting language learning partners. Lang-8 can also be used as a place where students improve their cultural competence since they have opportunities to interact with people from varied sociocultural backgrounds. However, teachers need to be careful not to promote this site as a single source of learning about other countries and cultures because potentially only a small range of views are represented on Lang-8.

In most cases, learners receive feedback promptly when they participate actively in Lang-8. Linguistic corrections and suggestions are mostly made by native speakers, but their accuracy is not always guaranteed due to the fact that most Lang-8 members are not language experts. In addition, although native speakers are generally good at telling what naturally sounds right and authentic to them, they may find it difficult to explain why something is correct or incorrect. Therefore, L2 teachers, as language experts, need to regularly monitor students’ learning process if accuracy and development of metacognition are the key focus of the lesson.

**Learner Fit (Design)**

Lang-8 is particularly attractive to L2 learners who have little access to L2 speaking communities in their daily life but wish to have a regular and consistent contact with native speakers to improve their L2 proficiency (especially in writing) through free-style writing and peer feedback. Most activities on Lang-8 are text-based, so learners are expected to know at least the basics of how to write in the language that they are learning, but learners can still participate in Lang-8 without knowing the writing system. Learners’ relationships with other Lang-8 users usually remain within the Lang-8 community, but it is not rare to see them meet via other online communication channels, such as Skype and Twitter.
From a technical perspective, Lang-8 users benefit from having access to language learning resources without constraints of time and space because the Lang-8 community is located online, which allows L2 learners to learn at their own pace. L2 learners have autonomy and flexibility in the choice of what they want to learn by creating their own learning content. Lang-8 is also designed to make it easy for learners to give and receive feedback. Although the way that people correct a sentence is different from user to user, the system provides technical support to easily cross out incorrect letters, words, and phrases, and give corrections in bold, read, blue, or gray font (see Figure 4).

Figure 4
Giving Feedback on Lang-8

![Corrected Sentence Example]

Participating in the Lang-8 community may well suit those who are seeking a learning environment that is friendly and encouraging. Most members (if not all) of Lang-8 are interested in learning and/or teaching L2s, so they share a common understanding that learning a new language does not only have enjoyable but also difficult moments. Due to this shared understanding, Lang-8 users tend to easily identify with each other's difficulties and have patience, empathy, and sometimes even compassion toward each other. This helps them to increase the general sense of belonging among Lang-8 members and to create an encouraging environment for language learning. Therefore, learners who hesitate to continue learning a new language due to their fear of making errors will find this website especially appealing.

This website can also be useful for learners who are used to learning a language in a passive way, but want to play a more active role in their language learning process. For example, in a typical school setting, learners often receive and process language input prepared by language teachers. Therefore, their learning goals and plans are heavily dependent on teachers. However, Lang-8 learners take more responsibility for their learning as learning materials are not given, but created by learners themselves. In addition, learners are encouraged to actively participate as participation in the Lang-8 community creates learning opportunities. Since less interaction often leads to less feedback from other community members, learners have a good reason to be active in their learning practice.

SUMMARY

Lang-8 is a social networking website that helps individual learners to form their own learning community online. On this website, typical language learning practices, such as writing and giving and receiving corrective feedback occur in the context of making new friends, so learners practice new languages in communicative, interactive, meaningful, and
authentic ways. Lang-8 also makes it possible for learners to meet many types of people from all around the world, giving them a chance to improve their cultural competence.

**SCALED RATING**
(1 low-5 high)
Implementation Possibilities: 5
Pedagogical Features: 4
Sociolinguistic Accuracy: 4
Use of Computer Capabilities: 5
Ease of Use: 5
Overall Evaluation: 4
Value for Money: 5

**PRODUCT DETAILS**
Lang-8 Inc.
Kyoto, Japan
Email: support@lang-8.com
Facebook page: https://www.facebook.com/lang8

**REFERENCES**


**REVIEWER’S BIODATA**
Young Sang Cho is an assistant professor of General Education Center at Dankook University in South Korea. He received a Ph.D. degree in Foreign and Second Language Education at the University at Buffalo, State University of New York. His research interests include computer assisted language learning (CALL), L2 acquisition, L2 teaching methodology, and feedback and engagement.

**REVIEWER’S ADDRESS**
E-mail: 03choy@gmail.com