

Lang-8 puts networking onto a linguistic level

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With the current enthusiasm for online networking sites reaching a fever pitch with people flocking to MySpace and, recently, Facebook by the millions — not to mention mixi, which has 8 million users in Japan — it was only a matter of time before there would emerge a Web site devoted to foreign language education and exchange that relied on a similar format.

One such site, Lang-8 (www.lang-8.com), aims to bring together people of different cultural and linguistic backgrounds in an effort to enhance foreign-language study. The site's founder, Yang Yang Xi, graduated from Kyoto University this spring with a degree in computer science and has been working on the Web site since.

Chinese by birth, Yang Yang grew up in Japan, and his fluency in both Chinese and Japanese spurred him to use his talents in programming to construct Lang-8. The format, similar to mixi, allows people to write daily diaries on whatever topics they choose and in any language they want. These diaries are then edited by their friends on Lang-8, who are native in the particular language in which the diary is written. For example, Miyuki composes a diary in English, the language she is studying. This diary is then edited by her friend James, a native speaker. James, on the other hand, is studying Chinese and has a Chinese friend correcting his mistakes, and so on.

The site is currently translated into both simplified and classical Chinese, as well as Japanese and English, and Yang Yang intends to add a Korean-language interface in the near future. Current subscribers study French, Spanish, German, Greek, Korean, Vietnamese and more. Like most networking sites, the site allows you to join communities that appeal to your interests and to post upcoming events on a calendar.

The diary editing interface is very simple to use, allowing you both to highlight text that you wish to change and to provide comments explaining mistakes and adding more detailed suggestions.

While it is true that Lang-8 is a latecomer to the social networking scene, unlike MySpace or mixi, it has a more specific purpose: fostering language exchange. Though this may limit the number of users to those who are interested in studying languages, it also caters to a larger market: Those who may already be a member of another competitor site may still give Lang-8 a look because it provides something more than networking.

Foreign language study is usually quite expensive, and having a free service where a person can write in the language they are studying and have it corrected by a native speaker is a convenient tool. Of course writing is only one aspect of language acquisition, and this is where Lang-8 does come up short. Furthermore, the quality of editing is only as good as the level of the person editing. There are no controls over how much time one takes to edit a diary or evaluation of how good their language skills are.

However, to be fair to Lang-8, it was never intended to supplant other tools of language acquisition, only to supplement them. Right now, Lang-8 is invitation only, which has limited the number of members to a relatively small group. Still, Yang Yang feels that limiting the pool is the best of way of controlling the growth of the system in terms of which languages are being utilized while the site is in its nascent stages, and of creating a good environment for the site to grow. He points to mixi as proof that an invite-only approach can still spread like wildfire. Mixi is still by invite-only and has not suffered in terms of advertising or number of subscribers. Still, Yang Yang leaves the door open for public registration when there are enough subscribers.

He is optimistic about the future. Although he is not generating revenue from the site, he intends to take on advertisers one day, and may even have a premium service. His goal is to have over 1,000 users in the next six months, to be one of the world's largest social networking sites devoted to language study and exchange in three years, and to be generating a profit. He also wants to start developing a new system dealing with international exchange once next-

generation technology is in place.

While many social networking sites rise and fall, perhaps one with a more specific purpose, such as language exchange in the case of Lang-8, will have a bit more staying power.

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