

ENGLISH LANGUAGE ACQUISITION THROUGH ONLINE FANFICTION READING

AQUISIÇÃO DE LÍNGUA INGLESA POR LEITURA DE FANFICTION ON-LINE

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Abstract: We call fanfiction the works and texts created by fans to fans. This study aims to define the beliefs and habits of online fanfiction readers and their relationship with English as a second language. We explored the linguistic influences of motivation and the affective filter (DÖRNYEI, 1998; GARDNER, 1991; KRASHEN, 1982) on informal language acquisition, while also bringing forth the concept of reading comprehension in this context (KRASHEN; BLAND, 2014). We gathered a brief history of fanfiction as a genre by Coppa (2006) as well as its characteristics (BLACK, 2006; TOSENBERGER, 2014) to justify the importance of the genre in language development. The instrument chosen for this research was a questionnaire, shared through social media, reaching over 100 responses from a diversity of international participants. With this variety of responses, the habits of fanfiction readers as well as their informal language acquisition input and views on language learning were investigated to find the approach used by fanfiction readers to acquire language. We found that our participants sought the content rather than the language, as they saw development in their use of the language in informal context, and progress in vocabulary and overall written skills.

Keywords: fandom; fanfiction; English language acquisition; online language acquisition; reading comprehension

Resumo: Chamamos de fanfiction as obras e textos criados de fãs para fãs. Este estudo busca definir as crenças e hábitos dos leitores de fanfiction on-line e sua relação com o inglês como segunda língua. Exploramos as influências linguísticas de motivação e o filtro afetivo (DÖRNYEI, 1998; GARDNER, 1991; KRASHEN, 1982) na aquisição informal de língua, enquanto também apontamos o conceito de compreensão de leitura nesse contexto (KRASHEN; BLAND, 2014). Construímos um breve histórico da fanfiction como gênero (COPPA, 2006) e suas características (BLACK, 2006; TOSENBERGER, 2014), justificando a importância do gênero no desenvolvimento linguístico. O instrumento escolhido para a pesquisa foi um questionário, compartilhado em redes sociais, alcançando mais de 100 respostas de uma diversidade de participantes internacionais. Com tais respostas, os hábitos dos leitores de fanfiction e seu engajamentos com a segunda língua foram investigados para encontrarmos a forma utilizada pelos leitores para adquirir a língua. Descobrimos que nossos participantes buscavam o conteúdo das fanfictions, e não a língua, sendo que eles notaram desenvolvimento em seu uso da língua em contextos informais, além de melhorias em seu vocabulário e habilidades escritas em geral.

Palavras-chave: fandom; fanfiction; aquisição de língua inglesa; aquisição de língua on-line; compreensão de leitura.

INTRODUCTION

With the growth of the idea of English as a Global Language, International Language or Lingua Franca (CRYSTAL, 2003; JENKINS, J., 2007), we start to understand English as the main language for communicating with others and sharing knowledge and ideas. The need to understand and use it becomes part of our development, either for our professional growth or access to entertainment. Online fanfiction provides a form of bond with the language, as it eases the English language learner (hereby referred to as ELL) into the target language while also being entertaining and regarding subjects that are dear to the fanfiction reader. Within the fanfiction community, the English language also establishes itself as the main mean of communication, as a vast majority of works, based on contents of English origin or not, are written and published in English.

The didactic process of reading comprehension in a foreign language can be considered difficult to define due to its partly subjective nature, as the comprehension exists in between text and reader (AEBERSOLD; FIELD, 1997). After all, it is difficult to pinpoint when one begins understanding a certain topic or structure. However, we aim to question readers on their learning process and consider their personal opinions on the effectiveness of online fanfiction in second language acquisition as they experience the use of their knowledge when reading new works.

Online fanfiction readers have an array of works written by and to fans at hand, creating communities who share knowledge and admiration, developing their proficiency in the targeted language. This study aims to define how reading online fanfiction can be beneficial in the acquisition of an L2 and the impact it has on their reading comprehension skills. More specifically, we hope to analyze the effectiveness of online fanfiction through a questionnaire applied to readers of the genre, questioning whether online fanfiction readers had L2 acquisition in mind when seeking fanfiction written in English.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Fandom, which refers to the communities of fans from a certain media, and their practices can be considered a highly relevant form of acquisition environment outside of the classroom, as it uses the learners' motivation to engage them with the language, as Krashen (1982) points out. However, fanfiction as a genre is rarely seen in the academic scene despite its relevance, therefore we aim to start this conversation with this study. Having personally engaged in the fanfiction community, we believe that it is important to highlight that these practices go beyond simply reading the genre, as readers also engage in forums, discussion and beta reading - a common practice in which works can be edited by other readers before being published.

As Gardner (1985 *apud* DÖRNYEI, 1998, p.122) explains, motivation is "the extent to which an individual works or strives to learn the language because of a desire to do so and the

satisfaction experienced in this activity”. Motivation, as the word implies, is the reasoning behind one’s desire to keep studying and acquiring an L2. Dörnyei (1998) suggests that motivation is indispensable for SLA (Second language acquisition). According to his studies, even the most skilled ELLs, learning through the greatest methodologies, cannot acquire an L2 without motivation. Dörnyei explains that:

Motivation provides the primary impetus to initiate learning the L2 and later the driving force to sustain the long and often tedious learning process; indeed, all the other factors involved in L2 acquisition presuppose motivation to some extent. (DÖRNYEI, 1998, p. 117)

For Dörnyei, opposite to the way that other skills are unable to make up for a lack of motivation, highly motivated ELLs are able to overcome several adversities in their learning acquisition process. According to Gardner (1995 *apud* DÖRNYEI, 1998, p. 122), L2 motivation consists of a “central mental 'engine' or 'energy-center' that subsumes effort, want/will (cognition), and task-enjoyment (affect)” as it provides the ELL with an intense desire to learn, great consistency during studies and a control over the acquisition process.

There is great difference in the process of acquisition in formal environments and in informal settings, but the acquisition development which happens through the ELL’s own motivation has several documented positive effects. If we consider Gardner (1991), each individual has a different set of skills and abilities when it comes to learning:

a contrasting set of assumptions is more likely to be educationally effective. Students learn in ways that are identifiably distinctive. The broad spectrum of students - and perhaps the society as a whole - would be better served if disciplines could be presented in a number of ways and learning could be assessed through a variety of means. (GARDNER, 1991, p.12)

The terminology used in the present research is greatly influenced by Krashen (1982), as the dichotomy created between learning and acquisition fits the goals set. For Krashen (1982), L2 learning refers to methodological studies set in a classroom, in a formal environment, while acquisition refers to the natural and subconscious process of acquiring language through the use of the language in informal settings for communication purposes.

When the ELL has the liberty to choose the content they read while acquiring an L2, they find themselves lowering their affective filter. Krashen (1982) defines the affective filter in SLA as the barriers that ELLs develop when studying the language, referring to how they might feel more or less comfortable while learning. When an ELL has a low affective filter, the acquisition process happens more easily. Krashen (1982) attributes a low affective filter to three traits in the ELL: motivation, self-confidence and low anxiety, as these three characteristics define a successful L2 learner. Krashen highlights that a low affective filter is mostly attributed to the acquisition of a language, as opposed to L2 learning.

Although reading comprehension skills and techniques are very commonly used in the classroom, the process behind its development in informal settings can be described as natural and particular, as each ELL approaches his/her own reading habits in different ways. Godwin-Jones (2018) highlights the advantages of online reading practices, pointing at its functionality in language acquisition, as ELLs are able to engage in meaningful real-life use of the language in different contexts, having great access to a large number of texts with an infinite variety of themes and levels of complexity.

According to Anderson (2009), reading skills are placed as the first step into language acquisition, as reading comprehension works as an auxiliary to the development of the remaining skills. The author describes this idea through the characteristics of a skilled reader:

Good readers have higher success in writing when they have a solid knowledge base that has been developed through wide reading. Good readers have the fundamental skills to listen to someone talk about a topic they have read and they have a higher success of understanding. Good readers have higher success in speaking tasks when they have gained input through reading. It is difficult to imagine an academically successful individual in the twenty-first century who is not an avid and effective reader (ANDERSON, 2009, p. 218)

As Anderson (2009) describes the basic skill for an ELL is the reading skill, as the ability to read and understand written texts allows the development of the remaining skills as well as encourages the learner to seek more content, as good readers have the confidence to decipher complex texts and expand their knowledge.

Language can be acquired through reading practices as it easily provides the reader with an expanded vocabulary. But rather than having it be a repetitive and ineffective process of vocabulary learning, the reader is provided with intertwined concepts which help text comprehension with new words as well as previous knowledge (TOMITCH, 2009). For an ELL to develop such proficiency and vocabulary recognition, one must engage in extensive reading (GRABE, 2002) as in a high input of written content, disregarding its difficulty level or even theme, accommodating to the ELLs interests while also putting them in a position of constant immersion in an L2.

ELLs who acquire language through the development of their reading comprehension have the opportunity to experience the language in use, as Godwin-Jones (2018, p. 11) describes that “it is essential for the learner to have access to a sufficient volume of language in different contexts to be able to identify patterns, as well as to gain insight into how usage can vary according to formality or other contexts.”

As fanfiction can be understood as an underground or unknown universe of texts and works, we must understand what it stands for and what defines it. Black (2006) briefly summarizes fanfiction as:

writing in which fans use media narratives and pop cultural icons as inspiration for creating their own texts. In such texts, fan authors imaginatively extend the original plotline or timeline [...] create new characters [...] and/or develop new relationships between characters that are already present in the original source [...] (BLACK, 2006, p.172)

Truly, the statement dictates what fanfiction is, but the genre has endless possibilities, as it is not held back by any sort of literary theory to define its limits. Fanfiction has never been peaceful or democratic (FATHALLAH, 2017) as it is created to cater to a certain desire that may not please all readers, and existing in an environment open to direct criticism, fanfiction can generate great debate as well as open new doors, given that fanfiction allows the creation of literature design to cater to the reader's wishes.

When thinking of the description of fanfiction, Busse (2007 *apud* TOSENBERGER, 2014, p.14) brings the term "intense intertextuality" as a way to describe the way fanfiction in itself exists using elements of a pre-existing form of media as well as assuming the reader's knowledge of several elements of literature within the fandom. By describing fanfiction as this intense intertextuality, we recognize the genre as a literary form that requires great intellectual prowess from the reader, as one must be highly aware of the pre-existing elements before reading the actual text: "The modifier 'intense' recognizes that the unmarked term 'intertextuality' denotes a quality of all texts, and therefore doesn't sufficiently single out fanfictional-type narratives" (TOSENBERGER, 2014, p. 14).

As it exists as a non-profitable art movement (JENKINS, H., 1992), fanfiction follows its own themes and discussions, without having to answer to whichever requests made by publishing houses. As Romano (2012 *apud* TOSENBERGER, 2014, p. 4-5) argues, the fanfiction community often criticizes the fanfiction works published. However, it admits that some of the most praised pieces of writing:

are completely unpublishable for reasons that have nothing to do with nebulous assessments of literary quality, and everything to do with the fact that fanfiction is often so deeply embedded within a specific community that it is practically incomprehensible to those who don't share exactly the same set of references (TOSENBERGER, 2014, p. 5).

Therefore, fanfiction happens to "allow us to experience media contents differently as well as generate different interpretative categories of our society" (ARTIERI, 2012, p. 463). Fanfiction begins and exists as a genre which highlights the female protagonism within the fandoms (FATHALLAH, 2017; COPPA, 2006; MIRMOHAMADI, 2014) and expands into a genre which deals with taboo subjects with no restraints.

The understanding of how fandom works is different according to different spectrums or communities, the concept of a dichotomy between affirmational and transformational fandom, as fan theorist Obsession_inc (2011) points out, can be highlighted, as fans who engage with fanfiction fall under the transformational category, as affirmational fans accept the original media content

as the truth and don't change it or re-imagine it. While transformational fans use this original content as a starting point, taking the liberty to change it and explore it in new ways. The transformational fans have the chance to put their own identity and reality into the media, creating a more relatable and open environment that can be accessible and comforting for these communities.

Fanfiction is known for approaching sexuality, gender identity, social constructs, and puberty in a way that is difficult to be found in published works - maybe because the writers speak from their own experiences - and take the reader seriously, as young and naive as one might be. The exchange of experiences and the conversation that happens among original content, fanfiction writer and fanfiction reader open endless paths for the creation of spaces where the fanfiction consumer feels welcome to start learning.

When Toivakka (2018) documents in the title of her work that a fanfiction reader "started reading even though [she] didn't understand much", she sparks a conversation regarding fanfiction as a language learning tool, solving dilemmas in reading instruction (GRABE, 2002). ELLs who acquire their reading comprehension skills through fanfiction can present some reading strategies that are challenging to be introduced in the classroom (ANDERSON, 2014) as they engage in learning freely.

Some behaviors of online fanfiction readers can be extremely positive for their language acquisition:

In composing online fanfictions, ELLs are able to draw on popular cultural, social, and personal resources to construct an identity as an English writer and reader that may depart significantly from the one that they are able to display in the ESL classroom. (BLACK, 2005, p.124)

When readers acquire language through self-teaching in an online environment, Godwin-Jones (2017) believes that their brains go through "self-organizing" in which all the information acquired is organized in a way that is more appropriate for each individual, facilitating the use of the language more naturally. Online fanfiction readers will have the choice to lower their own affective filter and teach themselves the language through their own free space.

The choice of reading fanfiction in English does not derive from the interest in learning the language, as Toivakka (2018) suggests that readers seek English content due to a larger number of works and greater community involvement, finding that their motivation behind reading in an L2 comes due to personal reasons. In such cases, the acquisition of the language happens naturally and subconsciously, as Toivakka's research finds that readers saw improvement on their formal learning of the language, as they read and wrote fanfiction, recreationally.

Fanfiction reading works as a form of connecting the ELL with other texts and literary works in the language, as Tan *et al.* (2017) conclude that fanfiction serves as an introduction to canonical

literature, as it builds a base of understanding and relatability between the reader and the text. Tan *et al.* (2017) point out that reading romance fanfiction creates a process of inspiration in which the reader is compelled to keep reading as these texts spark certain feelings within the reader, which motivates them to find new texts with the means of repeating this experience.

Motivation regards the final process of reaching L2 proficiency, as Dörnyei (1998) theorizes that “knowing an L2 also involves the development of some sort of ‘L2 identity’ and the incorporation of elements from the L2 culture” (DÖRNYEI, RNYEI, 1998, p. 118). While Black (2006) resolves that “online, pop cultural spaces provide opportunities for youth to fashion linguistic and cultural identities for themselves” (BLACK, 2006, p.172), opening opportunities for not only L2 learners but also readers in general to find a safe space and a new online identity within the fandom.

Online fanfiction readers aim to build their L2 identity and understanding of this new culture, but it is not restricted to English-speaking cultures, as both readers and writers of fanfiction live in other countries and experience different cultures. English comes as a Global Language, International Language or Lingua Franca (CRYSTAL, 2003; JENKINS, J., 2007) just as fanfiction exists as a venue for “a shared appreciation for multiple languages, different cultural perspectives, and alternative forms of text” (BLACK, 2006, p. 172). Toivakka (2018) also points out that fanfiction is mainly produced and shared in English with the goal of reaching greater, international audiences, not only of those who are native English speakers, but also other ELLs. The author points out that authors who write in English seek more interactions and a larger group of readers, who therefore respond with more feedback than works written in other languages.

Beyond the simple practice of reading fanfiction, these online spaces allow for ELLs to experiment on the use of the language and develop their own ideas and interpretations of the texts, as they have the feedback of more experienced ELLs and native English speakers as they test themselves using the language. As fanfiction is known for its use of different structures of the texts as well as a vast array of media of sharing, ELLs are able to see, in practice, several kinds of genres in distinct contexts. According to Black (2005, p. 127), “online fanfiction offers a range of multimodal, intertextual, and hybrid writing activities in which ELLs are able to draw on personal, academic, and community resources to express their ideas and to communicate with others in English”.

DEVELOPMENT

The present research was conducted qualitatively with an exploratory nature, as it demands for the researchers to “intentionally put themselves in a position to make discoveries” (STEBBINS, 2011, p.4). With the same mindset, this research has also been applied online, aiming to reach a greater variety of answers, as it has been shared through the aforementioned fandoms. It is

important to note the necessity for this research to be qualitative as the results depend on the participants' opinions and personal views.

The instrument chosen to better fit this research was a questionnaire, aimed to investigate the impression of L2 fanfiction readers over its influence in second language acquisition. As a theoretical background to build the questionnaire, Dörnyei's (2003) ideas were studied and applied. As the author suggests, the questions were created to be adequate for the aimed public, with fitting language, balancing open and closed questions so as to not demotivate the participants while answering, as we were also being careful of the length of the questionnaire. Following Dörnyei's descriptions, the questionnaire used a very informal and simple text, in order to provide participants with a more comfortable scenario. We also added filler questions about the participants' interest in the theme of the research to motivate them to answer further.

This way, we built a questionnaire, through the platform Google Forms, with 23 questions, having eight open questions and 15 closed questions. We divided the questionnaire into sections to facilitate the answering process, having an initial section with three questions to gather general information about the participants. The second section aimed to learn about the participants' second language acquisition process, with eight questions. To assess their English level, we opted to follow the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages table, adding a small description of each level of proficiency for the participants to evaluate themselves. For the third section, with six questions, the questions tried to draw the participants' relationship with fanfiction. The last section of questions consisted of six questions for the participants to express their impressions of online fanfiction as a second language acquisition tool. Ending the questionnaire, the participants opted to have their answers be included in the research in a Term of Agreement.

Before publishing the questionnaire, we ran a pilot test of the questionnaire, having two English language students as well as two online fanfiction readers from outside of the academic field answer the questions to test the functionality and clearness of the questionnaire. With the certification of its practicality, the questionnaire was published and shared. To share this questionnaire with the goal of reaching the target audience, it was published on one of the author's personal Twitter account and shared with some notable fanfiction writers. The tweet was published in the afternoon of February 12th, 2021, reaching 112 answers within less than 30 hours.

ANALYSIS OF RESULTS

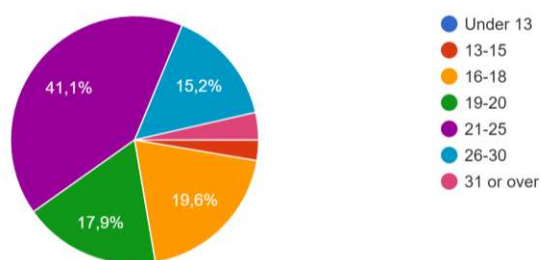
As already mentioned, we have had a great range of responses, having participants from various ages and countries. Only six answers were from participants that were native English speakers, but those still added great commentary to the research, as discussed in the analysis.

Most of the participants ranged from the ages of 21 to 25 years old (41,1%), followed by participants of ages between 16 and 18, making up 19,6% of the answers, while 17,9% of

the participants were 19-20 years old. 15,3% of the participants were between 26 and 30 years old, while only 3,6% of the participants were aged over 31 years old. The minority of the participants were those aged under 15, while none of the participants had less than 13 years of age, as observed in Graph 1.

Graph 1: Participants' age

How old are you?
 112 respostas

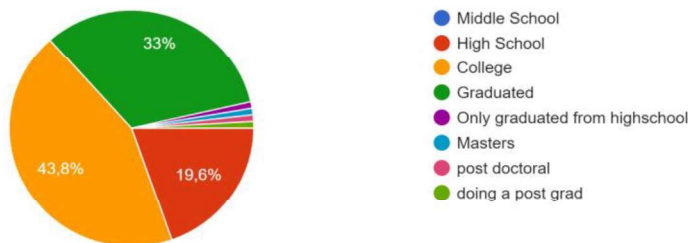


Source: Authors (2023)

As for the participants' level of education, 43,8% of the participants are college students, while 33% have already graduated. 19,6% of the participants attend high school, while three participants added that they were studying in higher education levels (post-doctorates and masters) and one participant specified that he/she had only graduated high school, which we can visualize in Graph 2.

Graph 2: Participants' level of Education

Level of Education
112 respostas

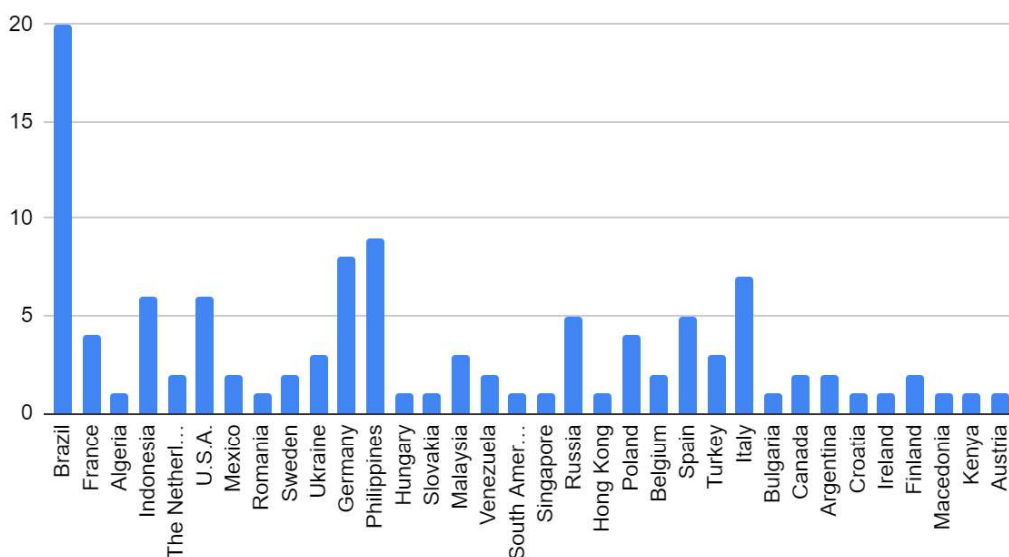


Source: Authors (2023)

The participants answered the questionnaire from all parts of the world, adding up to answers from 34 different countries of four continents. A great majority of the answers were from Europe (46,4%), followed by 30,3% of the answers originated from America, 20,5% of the participants originated from Asian countries and 1,7% answers from Africa. The countries with the most participants were Brazil (20 participants), the Philippines (nine participants) and Germany (eight participants). The data collected can be seen on Graph 3.

Graph 3: Nationality of participants

Where are you from?



Source: Authors (2023)

In accordance with their countries of origin, the native languages of the participants were as follows: 20 Brazilian Portuguese speakers, 11 Spanish speakers, 10 German speakers, while Filipino and Italian had seven speaking participants each. There were also six Indonesian speakers, five Russian speakers, while Polish, Dutch and French were represented by four speaking

participants each. Malay and Turkish had three speakers each, while Ukrainian, Finish, Arabic and Swedish were the native languages of two participants each. And only one representative of Slovak, Cantonese, Romanian, Gaelige, Macedonian, Bulgarian, Hungaria, Swahili, Chinese and Croatian. Interestingly enough, three participants pointed out their bilingual upbringing, having as a first language, Ukrainian and Russian, Catalan and Spanish and French and Turkish. As pointed out previously, six participants were native English speakers, five being from the USA and one participant from the Philippines, a bilingual country. One of the participants answered inconclusively, informing that he/she did not remember which was his/her first language.

When questioned about any L2 they had acquired, 30 of the participants specified they only knew English other than their L1 and five participants denied knowing other languages. Most of the participants were familiar with other languages other than their L1 and English. The most popular languages were German, with 26 mentions, French, with 23 mentions, Spanish, with 20 mentions, Korean, with 15 mentions, Japanese with 10 mentions, and Chinese/Mandarin with seven mentions. Arabic, Russian, Filipino, and Swedish were mentioned three times each, while Croatian, Italian, Javanese, and Dutch were mentioned twice each. Turkish, Galician Czech, Malay, Serbian, and Catalan were also mentioned once each by the participants. The answers varied from levels of proficiency, but most participants showed interest in learning these new languages.

As for their proficiency level in English, the participants' self-evaluation pointed to 42,9% of the participants being C1 - Advanced, followed by 36,6% of the participants being C2 - Proficient. 17% of the participants evaluated themselves as a B2 - Independent, while 3,6% of the participants described their level as a B1 - Intermediate. None of the participants opted for the A levels (A1 - Beginner and A2 - Elementary).

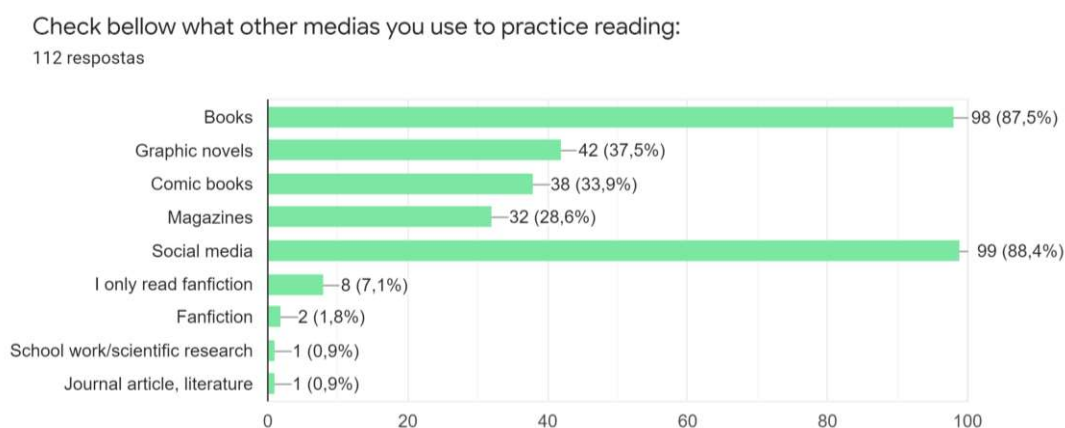
In answer to the question of their participation in English classes in school, 98,2% of the participants confirmed that they attended such classes. However, when questioned if they sought English classes outside of school, 72,3% of the participants informed that they did not.

In a multiple-choice question, the participants checked the different spontaneous means of input they engaged with to learn English besides fanfiction. 87,5% of the participants confirmed that they learned through TV shows, 82,1% opted for having learned through Social Media, 78,6% said to have learned English through music, 77,7% of the participants checked YouTube as a mean of learning English they used, 33% confirmed to have learned English through Video Games and only two participants denied having learned through the means mentioned. With this overview, we are led to believe that most of the participants engage with spoken input, such as TV shows, YouTube and music, as well as direct conversational interaction with the use of the language, in the case of Social Media and Video Games (RPG, chat rooms and servers).

The participants also had the option to write their own means of learning the language, to which four of them added Anime, four added books and literature, three participants mentioned contact with natives and practice of speaking, and two mentioned movies. Scientific articles and research were brought up by two participants, webtoons and manga were mentioned twice and newspapers were also brought up once.

The following question had the participants opting for the different media they used to practice reading, specifically, as they could also opt for various options. Social Media was the most popular, as 88,4% of the participants opted for it, closely followed by books with 87,5% of the participants checking it, 37,5% of participants chose graphic novels, 33,9% mentioned comic books and 28,6% checked magazines. Only 8,9% of the participants opted that they only read fanfiction to practice reading, and two participants added different means of reading practice, which were scientific research and articles. We can visualize the participants' choices in Graph 4.

Graph 4: Reading English input



Source: Authors (2023)

At the end of the section, the participants had the chance to freely comment on their language learning process, to which we have gathered 75 responses. Following the prompt of the research, a great part of the participants commented on the practicality of fanfiction for language and vocabulary improvement as well as other fandom practices such as subtitle translation, fandom community conversation, and RPG. The participants pointed out that fanfiction and conversations within the fandom helped with several aspects of the language acquisition process.

As the participants brought up their learning process, several commented on their preference towards informal acquisition, as they did not feel motivated towards learning with formal classroom strategies. The statement made by Participant 72 embodies Krashen's acquisition theory perfectly, which read: "learning for fun, where the learning happens on itself, and where it's second to a thing that I find interesting [...] has been incredibly more powerful than learning in a school/ exams context".

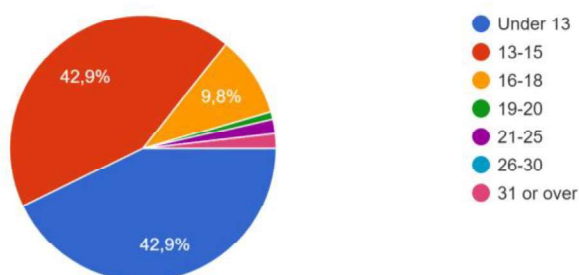
The participants mentioned the importance of immersion numerous times, citing the relevance of conversation, contact with music, TV shows and English speakers several times. Participant 99, for example, highlighted that watching “interviews of a celebrity they like, honestly, it helps a lot, especially if English is that celebrity's first language, and even if it's not, subtitles help you improve a lot as well, plus you don't even realize you're studying English you're just having fun!”. The topic of subtitles showed up several times, as participants pointed out that most fandom communities depend on those to engage with the content, be it in English or in other languages, following the example of anime, as some participants indicated that the content they engaged with did not have subtitles in their first language available, so they started to practice reading it in English.

The first question of the third section inquired the participants' age as they began reading online fanfiction, to which a striking majority checked to having started reading under the age of 15. Precisely, 42,9% of the participants started before the age of 13, 42,9% started between the ages of 13 and 15, while 9,8% of the participants started between the ages of 16 and 18 and only two participants (1,8%) started reading between the ages of 21 to 25.

Two of the participants opted for 31 or over and specified that they actually have never read fanfiction in their native language, only in English, either due to a lack of content or because they did not feel comfortable reading it in their L1. Participant 30 specified that they had only read fanfiction in their native language at the age of 19, having read only in English prior to it. None of the participants started reading fanfiction between the ages of 26 to 30. The participants' age range as they first started reading fanfiction can be pictured in Graph 5.

Graph 5: Participants' first contact with fanfiction

How old were you when you started reading fanfiction in your language?
 112 respostas



Source: Authors (2023)

Subsequently, the participants were questioned about their first contact with online fanfiction in English, to which the majority of participants stated that they started reading the genre in English during their teenage years. Specifically, 44,6% of the participants started reading between the ages of 13 and 15, 33% of the participants started reading between the ages of 16

and 18 and 14,3% of the participants were still younger than 13 when they started. Only 4,5% of the participants started reading fanfiction in English between the ages of 19 and 20, while only 3,6% of the participants started between the ages of 21 and 25. None of the participants started reading fanfiction in English after the age of 26.

If we analyze this information, we come to the conclusion that most of these fanfiction readers had their first contact with the genre during their pre-adolescence, with incredible young ages, while their switch to fanfiction in English happened in a very short period of time after they began reading, as most participants were teenagers when they started reading fanfiction in English.

The participants had the opportunity to justify why they started reading fanfiction in English, to which over half of them simply pointed to the amount of content written in the language, the range of themes and stories, the disponibility of stories with their favorite characters and fandom as well as a lack of content in their native language. Some participants mentioned that the fanfiction they read in their native language was translated from English and they decided to read the original work instead of waiting for the translation. Friend recommendations and indications in social media were also a reason for the participants to start reading in English.

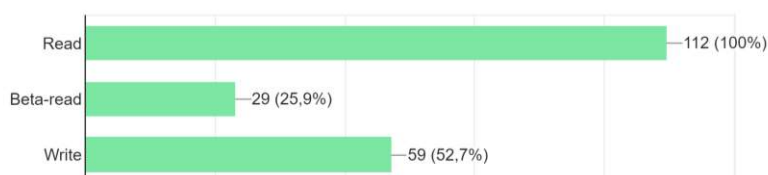
A great number of the participants also commented on the quality of the content, as Participant 87 guessed that “maybe it's because there is a wider variety of fanfics in English and therefore it's easier to find good ones”. Remarkably, many participants highlighted the distance when reading in a second language, as they felt more comfortable not having the text be in the language spoken by those around them. For some participants, the choice to read in English came from the fact that the original content was produced in English. Only seven participants mentioned learning the language as an actual reason to read fanfiction in English.

The participants were also questioned in a multiple-choice question about their engagement with online fanfiction. 100% of participants confirmed that they read fanfiction, while 52,7% informed that they also write fanfiction and 25,9% beta-read, which refers to the activity of editing and revising fanfiction prior to its online publication, as seen on Graph 6.

Graph 6: Participants' engagement with fanfiction

When it comes to fanfiction, you...

112 respostas



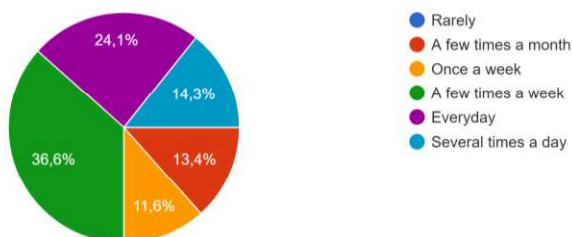
Source: Authors (2023)

As for the frequency with which the participants read fanfiction, most participants read it constantly throughout the week. 36,6% of the participants read fanfiction a few times a week, 24,1% read it every day and 14,3% read it several times a day. 13,4% of the participants only read fanfiction a few times a month, while 11,6% of them read it once a week and none of them opted to read it only rarely. The frequency of reading fanfiction can be better explained through Graph 7.

Graph 7: Participants' frequency reading fanfiction

How often do you read fanfiction?

112 respostas



Source: Authors (2023)

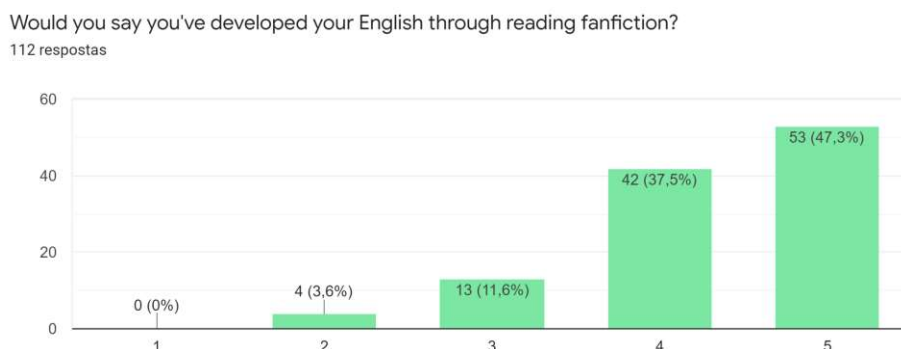
At the end of the section dedicated to the participants' fanfiction reading habits, they had the opportunity to share their favorite fanfiction characters or OTP (One True Pairing), as it is common for fanfiction readers to have specific pairings they enjoy. Although their answers will not be analyzed, we see a clear indication of the motivational factor present in online fanfiction reading.

We brought the research questions up by adapting them to the questionnaire, inquiring the participants on their learning preferences, skills and intentions while reading. To better understand the participants' opinions, Graphs 10, 11 and 12 were based on Likert scale questions, to which the participants had to choose a number from 1 to 5 to which 1 meant "strongly disagree" and 5 meant "strongly agree".

Firstly, we asked participants whether they agreed with the statement that they developed their English through reading fanfiction. A striking majority of participants agreed with the statement, as 47,3% opted that they strongly agreed with the statement and 37,5% agreed with

it. However, 11,6% of the participants were partial to the statement and 3,6% participants disagreed with the statement. For a better understanding of this data, Graph 8 comes to aid:

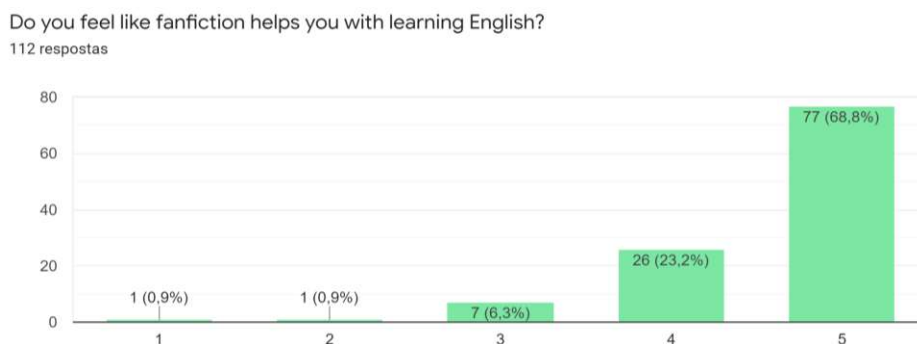
Graph 8: Participants' view of English development through fanfiction (ranked from 1 to 5 in order of agreement, 1 being "strongly disagree" and 5 being "strongly agree")



Source: Authors (2023)

The participants were also asked if they agreed with the statement that fanfiction helped them with English learning, to which the answers were similar with the previous statement. 68,8% of the participants strongly agreed with the statement, while 23,2% agreed with it. 6,3% of the participants partially agreed with the statement, as one participant disagreed and another strongly disagreed with the statement, as presented through Graph 9:

Graph 9: Participants' view of English development with the help of fanfiction (ranked from 1 to 5 in order of agreement, 1 being "strongly disagree" and 5 being "strongly agree")



Source: Authors (2023)

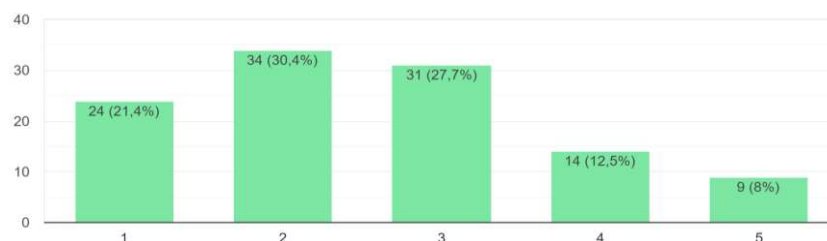
The two questions, although similar, had a slight variation in meaning which translated into the responses. As the participants agree that fanfiction is a form of acquiring language, they are more inclined to agree that it helps in the process of SLA. Later we find that participants see fanfiction as a great form of input, but they are still aware of the shortfalling of it and the importance of the remaining skills that are not matured through the genre.

We asked the participants if they agree with the statement that they intended on learning English as they started reading fanfiction in the language. 30,4% of the participants disagreed with the statement and 21,4% strongly disagreed with it as 27,7% of the participants partially

agreed with the statement. Only 12,5% of the participants agreed with the statement and 8% strongly agreed with it. We can see the impactful variation in responses in Graph 10:

Graph 10: Participants' intention of English acquisition (ranked from 1 to 5 in order of agreement, 1 being "strongly disagree" and 5 being "strongly agree")

Did you intend on learning English when you started reading fanfiction in the language?
112 respostas



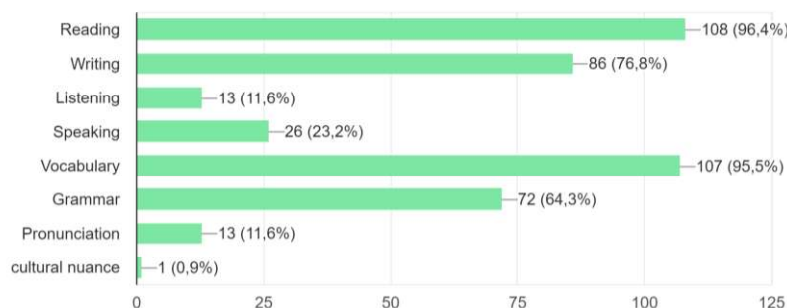
Source: Authors (2023)

With this result, as well as with the previous reasoning provided by the participants, our research inquiries are answered, as the main goal in reading online fanfiction in English comes from a desire for greater content and not from the desire to acquire the language. It becomes clear that the motivation towards reading fanfiction surpasses the challenge of learning a foreign language, corroborating Dörnyei (1998)'s theory that the ELL must be driven by a certain goal to acquire the language, even if other competences are lacking.

Subsequently, we asked participants which aspects of the English language were improved by reading fanfiction, referring to the basic skills, to which the participants could choose multiple options. As speculated, reading skills were a majority, with 96,4% of the participants choosing it, followed by the also speculated vocabulary skill, with 95,5% in accordance. 76,8% of the participants felt that fanfiction improved their writing skills, while 64,3% felt improvement in grammar skills. 23,2% of the participants felt that their speaking skills improved when reading fanfiction and 11,6% saw improvement in their listening skills as well as their pronunciation skills. One participant manually added that improvement in cultural nuance was noted through the practice. The participants' responses are visually expressed in Graph 11:

Graph 11: Skills acquired through fanfiction

By reading fanfiction, you feel that you improve your skills in....
112 respostas



Source: Authors (2023)

After questioning participants on the major skills acquired through fanfiction, they could add other knowledge they acquired through it (e.g. culture or slang), to which the answers received were very valuable to the understanding of the practice of reading the genre. Over half of the participants mentioned slangs and colloquial language as well as idioms, proverbs and reiterated vocabulary as the most predominant perception acquired through the genre, as Participant 5 puts that fanfiction makes the reader learn “how to understand vocabulary from context clues”.

A great portion of the participants also mentioned culture as an important part of the awareness they acquired through the genre. A part of the participants described that through fanfiction they had a greater grasp of cultural nuances, customs, differences as well as historical cultural consciousness, such as myths and folklore from certain parts of the world as well as traditions and values significant for the author, or even simple details like culinary or familiar relationship in some countries. This cultural awareness carries a certain weight, as Participant 34 explains that “fanfiction is diverse, more often than not socially and politically aware. It's always nice to read about the author's opinions and/or niche knowledge on certain matters through fiction”.

Still referring to the expansion of vocabulary, participants also numerously mentioned that certain niches of fanfiction help them grasp specific terminology regarding particular subjects, given that fanfictions are usually set in “alternative universes” (referred to as AUs), which define the characters' lifestyle or reality. One of the most common settings of fanfiction, as pointed out by the participants, was university and general scholar settings, allowing the readers to build a greater understanding of social cues, vocabulary, customs, and general experiences of this environment. Participant 30 describes the importance of maintaining this knowledge as “it helps me understand how young people view high school/college troubles etc. as in already over 30 these things might have changed already in the last decade”.

Many of the participants highlighted that fanfiction provided natural interactions and realistic language use, facilitating their understanding of English, allowing them to interact with genuine and authentic content, agreeing with Krashen (1982) as they prefer situations of acquisition over learning, as Participant 82 describes fanfiction as “how normal people talk and not the textbook version of a conversation”. As previously established, 52,7% of the participants engaged in fanfiction writing along with reading, and according to their responses to what they learned through the genre, many responded with the development of their narrative skills, praising fanfiction writers for their ability to create universes, describe characters and situate conversations, which translated to readers developing their own writing skills and conversational competence.

Lastly, the participants were given the opportunity to share their views on fanfiction as a tool for language learning, to which many expressed their passion for the genre and manifested positive incentive towards the practice of fanfiction reading for language acquisition purposes.

Most statements revolving around the motivational factor of the genre, as readers get to engage in reading practices through something they enjoy and are already familiar with, in addition to the availability of works, as there are endless accessible stories for readers to choose from. Participant 20's perspective sums up the general impressions:

I find it a very useful and important tool for language learning, even better than reading books, in my opinion. Thanks to the wonderful tagging system and the ability to search for something very specific that you want to read at the moment or to avoid something that you'd rather not read (that you can't always have with books), you get more invested in it from the get-go. I think that is why a lot of fanfiction readers are able to consume very large works and not even think about the fact that 150k words is quite a lot and published books rarely are that long. And even if you don't read fanfiction with a goal of improving your English and you don't actively do anything to learn new things that you see in the works you read, you'll still subconsciously pick up some new phrases and collocations that you meet the most. (PARTICIPANT 20)

As seen above, fanfiction readers have quite a lot of control over the content they choose to read, and even so, they have a huge gamma of options to choose from, all without cost and with easy access, which is something that was highlighted several times throughout the participants' rationale. This was described by Participant 103 simply as "It's easily accessible, it's free and the amount of stories online is endless". If we look into the academic explanation for this practice, we can note that engagement in extensive reading, as described by Grabe (2002), leads readers to develop better vocabulary understanding and easier language comprehension, which is confirmed by the participants' large agreement that the constant reading input of fanfiction is beneficial to their English acquisition.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

When Dörnyei (1998) affirms that motivation can replace several of the skills required to achieve language proficiency, we can see the fanfiction reader, facing such a challenge for the sake of a genre. For the development of our research, we built an online questionnaire and applied it to 112 participants from 34 different countries, all of which were online fanfiction readers, 94,6% of them reading the genre in English as a second language. Our responses mostly pointed out that the affective factor of fanfiction works as a driving force for language acquisition. As we analyzed the responses from our questionnaire seeking to define the participants' fanfiction reading habits related to their language acquisition process, we managed to find some common aspects of the genre that readers see as useful and learn from, along with some patterns in their views of fanfiction and language.

One of the objectives of this research was to define whether fanfiction readers intended in acquiring the language through engaging with the genre, which we can conclude that is not the case, as a majority of the responses pointed to different motivations, such as greater content, easier access and higher quality, opposed to 20,5% of the participants who opted to having interest in

learning the language. According to the participants, online fanfiction was not their only mean of input, but they still agree that the genre is responsible for part of their proficiency.

We also aimed to define which skills were mostly improved by the practice of fanfiction reading, as the theory gathered pointed towards the written skills. We managed to find data to sustain such a theory, as 76,8% of the participants claimed that online fanfiction was a great influence in their writing abilities, 95,5% brought up vocabulary development and the participants also mentioned their general grammatical and narrative skills. The data gathered also pointed out that fanfiction has a great impact in the participants' use of the language, as they get to engage with natural and spontaneous language.

Fanfiction, as Black (2006) defines, puts the readers in cultural contexts that allow them to create an identity in the second language they are acquiring, forming an understanding of the background of this language. In the same way, the participants of our research argued on the improvement they felt on their understanding of the different cultures described through fanfiction, permitting them to live through the reality of native English speakers as well as users of the language in a global context.

As we reached the end of this research, we see plenty of aspects that could have been investigated had we been more careful, such as the gender of the participants, when researching Transformational fandoms and the presence of women in these spaces (Obsession_inc, 2011), or even the inclusion of more specific questions to facilitate our analysis. There is still plenty of room for improvement in the subject of fanfiction, as we can further develop the theme. However, we hope that the genre of fanfiction can be more popularized in the academic field, as it offers a significant impact in language and social development.

We limited ourselves to the use of fanfiction outside the classroom, but the genre can be introduced in learning environments. Fanfiction exists in a volatile form and the works produced offer a great variety of themes for discussion and development, which we can bring into the lights of research in the future. As for the application of our discoveries in education, if we observe the pattern of fanfiction offering greater liberty for both reading and writing, increasing the motivation in the ELL, we can assume that the introduction of creative writing practices embracing the interests of students in the classroom can offer them the sense of agency, giving them control over their SLA process.

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