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GIOVANA FRANÇA DOS SANTOS



**ONLINE FANFICTION READING AS A CATALYST FOR SECOND LANGUAGE  
LEARNING**

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GIOVANA FRANÇA DOS SANTOS

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Supervisor: Prof. Dr<sup>a</sup>. Eva Carolina da Cunha

Article submitted to the Center of Arts and Communication at UFPE in fulfillment of the requirements for the bachelor's degree in English Language Teaching.

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**BANCA EXAMINADORA**

Prof<sup>a</sup>.Dr<sup>a</sup>.Eva Carolina da Cunha (Orientadora)  
Universidade Federal de Pernambuco - UFPE

Prof<sup>a</sup>. Dr<sup>a</sup>. Simone de Campos Reis (Examinadora Interna)  
Universidade Federal de Pernambuco - UFPE

## **ABSTRACT**

This study investigates the role of online fanfiction reading as a catalyst for foreign language acquisition, specifically English. Drawing on Krashen's (1982) Input and Affective Filter Hypotheses, Dornyei's (1998) motivation theory, and Jenkins' (2006) concept of participatory culture, the research explores how fanfiction fosters language development through immersive, interest-driven literacy practices. A qualitative-quantitative methodology was used via a Google Forms questionnaire, gathering responses from 127 fanfiction readers across diverse linguistic backgrounds. Findings reveal that fanfiction provides consistent exposure to authentic English input, enhances vocabulary, reading, and writing skills, and motivates learners through emotional engagement and community interaction. Notably, even participants who did not consciously use fanfiction for learning reported significant language gains. The study concludes that fanfiction serves as a valuable supplement to formal education, offering a low-anxiety, learner-centered environment that promotes sustained language development.

**Key-words:** Online Fanfiction Reading; Second Language Acquisition; English as a Foreign Language; Participatory Culture; Motivation.

## **RESUMO**

Este estudo investiga o papel da leitura de fanfics online como catalisador para a aquisição de língua estrangeira, especificamente o inglês. Com base nas Hipóteses de Input e Filtro Afetivo de Krashen, na teoria da motivação de Dornyei e no conceito de cultura participativa de Jenkins, a pesquisa explora como as fanfics promovem o desenvolvimento da linguagem por meio de práticas literárias imersivas e orientadas por interesse. Uma metodologia quali-quantitativa foi empregada por meio de um questionário do Google Forms, reunindo respostas de 127 leitores de fanfics de diversas origens linguísticas. Os resultados revelam que as fanfics proporcionam exposição consistente a inputs autênticos em inglês, aprimoram o vocabulário, as habilidades de leitura e escrita e motivam os alunos por meio do engajamento emocional e da interação com a comunidade. Notavelmente, mesmo os participantes que não usaram fanfics conscientemente para aprender, relataram ganhos significativos no idioma. O estudo conclui que as fanfics servem como um valioso complemento à educação formal, oferecendo um ambiente de baixa ansiedade e centrado no aluno, que promove o desenvolvimento sustentado da linguagem.

**Palavras-chave:** Leitura de Fanfics Online; Aquisição de Segunda Língua; Inglês como Língua Estrangeira; Cultura Participativa; Motivação

## **SUMMARY**

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, with the growth of literacy practices in cyberspace, the scenario of language learning has undergone several changes. With social media, fan communities, blogs, discussion forums, and fanfiction websites, it facilitates access to comprehensible input in English, making it easier to encounter reading material of different subjects in the individual's target language.

Fanfiction typically refers to stories based on characters from TV, movies, or books, created by fans. However, the genre has expanded to include Real Person Fiction (RPF), which focuses on real-life people, often celebrities. RPF can either stay true to the public personas of these individuals (called "canon compliant") or create entirely new settings and scenarios for them, known as an Alternative Universe (AU). AUs are more like original works, as they do not rely on the source material, but instead build unique worlds while keeping the characters' names and traits similar to their real-life counterparts.

Online fanfiction has been the target of studies in the communication field focused on participatory culture and media convergence. Jenkins (2006) says that fanfiction is a subversive way in which the audience interacts with media in their ways. Furthermore, online fanfiction reading offers accessible reading material due to its free and easy online availability and diverse nature, featuring works of a variety of genres and themes. Fanfiction serves as a motivational tool for language learning, thanks to its captivating nature. Individuals can easily become attached to fanfiction works due to their pre-existing emotional engagement with the characters. This can foster a reading habit in the learners, increasing their exposure to comprehensible input.

This study explores the intersection between online fanfiction reading and foreign language learning, focusing on the development of language skills and the acquisition of English through fanfiction reading, and examining how fanfiction reading can be a rich source of input on the target language. Drawing on Krashen's (1982) second language acquisition studies, the Affective Filter Hypothesis proposed by him, on how the affective factors can influence second language acquisition, Dornyei's (1998) motivation studies on language learning, Jenkins' (2006) participatory culture studies, and the benefits of affinity spaced learning on language learning.

These theories will form the theoretical framework of this study, which will be conducted as a qualitative-quantitative research via a questionnaire on Google Forms among

English learners who regularly engage with fanfiction. This research analysed the results of this questionnaire to show the beneficial effects of online fanfiction reading on the English learning development of the participants.

## **2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The theoretical framework guiding this study relies on Black (2006) and her case study on how fanfiction reading and writing can be beneficial for foreign language learners; Krashen (1982), who argued the importance of comprehensible input in low anxiety settings; Dorney (1998) who highlighted how motivation is valuable for learners and how it pushes them to pursue their learning efforts; Jenkins (2006) and the concept of Participatory Culture that serve as a motivator factor for learners to continue engaging with comprehensible input on the target language.

### **2.1 FANFICTION READING, FOREIGN LANGUAGE ACQUISITION AND MOTIVATION STUDIES.**

Having its first records in the late 60s, fanfiction is not precisely a new literary genre; however, it became more common after the popularization of the internet and the creation of fanfiction websites and blogs in the 90s. Consequently, it was more recognized academically by language scholars and researchers.

Black (2006) conducted a case study on how fanfiction communities can work as informal learning environments for English language learners (ELLs), documenting the experiences of Nanako, a Chinese immigrant in Canada who, with no prior English knowledge, started reading English-language anime fanfiction online. Nanako became an avid reader of fanfiction, and because the texts were primarily written in English, this interest became a conduit for her English learning. As fanfiction is often based on widely known media such as anime or film franchises, this means that for some learners with a limited vocabulary, this characteristic can be a facilitator for understanding due to their prior knowledge of the characters and environment.

Nanako's case also supports Krashen's (1982) Input Hypothesis, which states that contact with comprehensible input slightly above their comprehension level can be helpful to language learners. After frequently reading in English for years, Nanako began writing her fanfiction, using it as practice and receiving feedback from readers on fanfiction websites and communities, shaping her identity as a writer and as an English speaker, the lighter nature of the fan communities in contrast to the formal environment of classrooms can create a

welcoming atmosphere for the learners and make them more comfortable to create and share their creations.

According to Krashen's (1982) second language acquisition theory, the best methods to improve language acquisition include comprehensible input and low-anxiety situations, which means learners can achieve greater success by being exposed to content in the target language with messages they want to hear.

These methods do not force early production in the second language, but allow students to produce when they are "ready", recognizing that improvement comes from supplying communicative and comprehensible input, and not from forcing and correcting production.  
(KRASHEN, 1982, p.7)

This theory suggests that learners can improve their skills by enriching their repertoire in the target language in a relaxed and informal environment, by not being forced to produce in the target language, the learner feels comfortable and motivated to continue seeking comprehensible input.

This idea is better elaborated on the Affective Filter Hypothesis by Krashen, which states how affective factors can interfere with second language acquisition. According to Krashen (1982), individuals in uncomfortable environments, with low self-confidence and a lack of motivation, have a higher filter to the input received on the target language, causing it not to reach the language acquisition device in their brain. They are less sensitive to the input, delaying their progress in the language acquisition process. Individuals in a more welcoming environment, who are confident and motivated, are more likely to absorb the input received and become more proficient over time.

In addition to Krashen's theory, Dornyei's (1998) studies give valuable insights into the role of motivation in language learning. Dornyei emphasizes that motivation is a crucial factor in long-term language learning.

Without sufficient motivation, even individuals with the most remarkable abilities cannot accomplish long-term goals, and neither are appropriate curricula and good teaching enough on their own to ensure student achievement.  
(DORNYEI, 1998, p.1)

Dornyei's work underlines the importance of fostering and maintaining motivation in language learners, as it directly impacts their willingness to engage with language input and persist in their learning efforts.

Integrating Dornyei's motivational theories and Krashen's emphasis on comprehensible input and low-anxiety environments with Black's case study on fanfiction and its educational implications, a comprehensive framework can be drawn for understanding effective language acquisition strategies through fanfiction reading, by addressing both the cognitive and affective dimensions of language learning.



## **2.2 PARTICIPATORY CULTURE AND ONLINE FANFICTION READING AS A MOTIVATION FACTOR.**

Jenkins (2006) introduces the concept of participatory culture in his book "Convergence Culture", where individuals do not act as consumers only, but as active participants in the making of content related to a piece of media. This concept blurs the line between creators and consumers, encouraging the audience to share their insights on the original story published by entertainment companies, whether it be as individual comments on social media, collective discussions on podcasts and online forums, or fan fiction publishing.

Fan fiction reading on online platforms exemplifies participatory culture. Fans gather in online communities to share their works within their chosen fandoms, creating a safe space for feedback exchange between authors and readers. Jenkins (2006) refers to these communities as affinity spaces. Within these spaces, participants develop shared norms, practices, and linguistic conventions, developing a sense of belonging and community among members.

Being an active participant in these affinity spaces can offer several benefits for ESL learners. With the growth of the idea of English as a lingua franca (Jenkins, 2007), people started to understand English as the primary language for communication to unite people of different nationalities. Non-native speakers of English often turn to English fan fiction to increase their access to a broader range of works.

Participating in fanfiction affinity spaces can serve as a decisive motivation factor for second language acquisition. Language learners are drawn to these communities by their shared enthusiasm for a particular fandom, creating intrinsic motivation to engage with fanfiction content.

## **3. METHODOLOGY**

This study adopts a qualitative-quantitative approach to explore the reader's understanding of how fanfiction reading could help in their development of the English language. The qualitative method was chosen because it enables a subjective approach to the research, allowing the author to interpret the participants' responses. Along with the qualitative method, the quantitative method was also chosen to build this research, because for some questions, it is best to analyse the results through numbers, especially the ones used to compose the demographic of the participants.

The data were collected through a Google Forms questionnaire between May 19th and

May 20th, 2025. It included both multiple-choice and open-ended questions, resulting in a total of 15 questions. The complete form is available in the appendix. The questionnaire was applied online, being spread through link sharing on social media, reaching the target audience of the study, online fandom communities. The survey received 127 responses from readers of different language backgrounds.

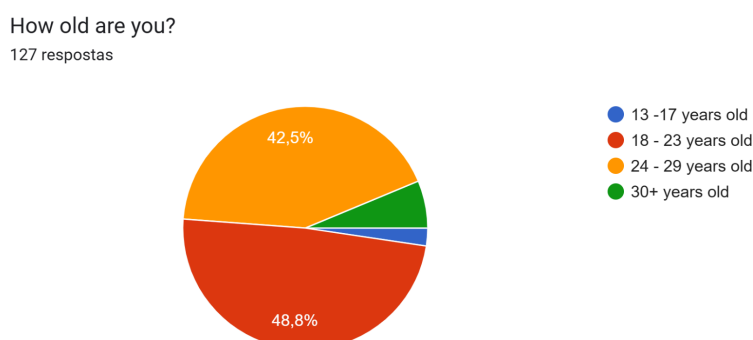
#### 4. DATA ANALYSIS

This analysis will utilize the results of selected questions from the questionnaire. Although the questionnaire contained 15 questions, not all were used to determine the research results, as they were primarily designed to guide the analysis and identify the demographic characteristics of the participants.

This analysis explores how non-native English speakers respond to online fanfiction reading as a meaningful input of English, examining the results of some questionnaire questions. This research aims to identify patterns in how online fanfiction reading affects the language learning process and explores its potential as a helpful tool.

The objective of this study is to determine whether fanfiction reading can be a helper to second language learning, focusing on the learning of English as a foreign language.

**Figure 1**



Most of the participants were young adults from 18 to 23 years old (48,8), followed by people between 24 and 29 years old (42,5%), while only 6,3% of the participants were over 30 years of age, the minority being teenagers between 13 and 17 years old (2,4%). This means that over 90% of participants are from a mature age range, which is significant when considering the educational value of fanfiction.

For second language learners, fanfiction offers authentic exposure to casual and idiomatic English, diverse writing styles, and cultural references that are often absent from traditional textbooks. The maturity of these readers allows them to benefit more fully from these aspects, as they are better equipped to reflect on language use, infer meaning from context, and apply new vocabulary and structures in real-life communication. These findings also help to dismiss the common misconception that fanfiction is primarily a teenage interest, highlighting instead that it attracts a broad, adult audience capable of critical reflection in the stories they read.

As for the native language of the participants, according to their country of origin 85 were portuguese speakers (Brazil), followed by 15 Spanish speakers (Argentina, Peru, Spain, El Salvador and Venezuela), 6 German speakers (Germany, Austria and Belgium), 3 Italian speakers, 2 French speakers (France), two from each of these countries: Finland, Indonesia, Russia and only one participant from: Saudi Arabia, Lithuania, Hungary, Iran, Unknown (Middle East), Egypt, Estonia, Poland, Unknown (North Africa), Algeria.

What is your level of education?  
127 respostas

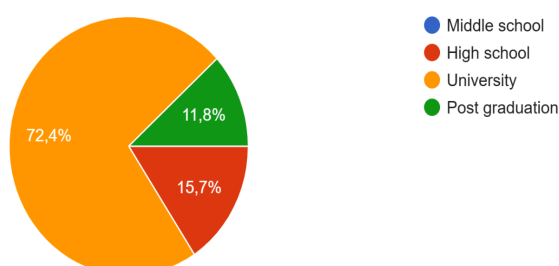


Figure 2

When asked about their level of education, the participants all had completed middle school, most of them having university education ongoing or complete (72.4%), followed by high school education (11.8%) and post-graduation (11.8%). This high level of education among the participants reinforces the idea that fanfiction consumption is not a purely adolescent activity, but rather one that attracts an intellectually engaged audience. For second language learners in particular, this background suggests that readers are likely to benefit from the linguistic and cultural richness present in fanfiction. Educated readers are more drawn to analyze texts critically, make connections across genres and contexts, and absorb nuanced language use, making fanfiction a valuable complement to language learning. This supports the view that fanfiction communities can function as informal learning environments where readers not only enjoy stories but also expand their vocabulary, cultural knowledge, and literacy skills in meaningful ways.

About their English education, 96.9% of the participants attended English classes as

part of their regular curriculum, and most of them also attended an English course outside of school (56.7%), making the majority of the participants have a base of formal English education.

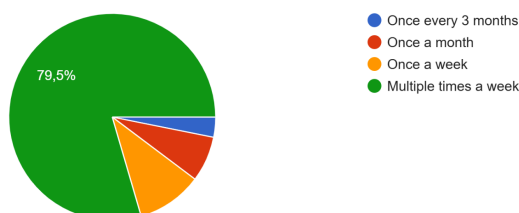
Figure 3



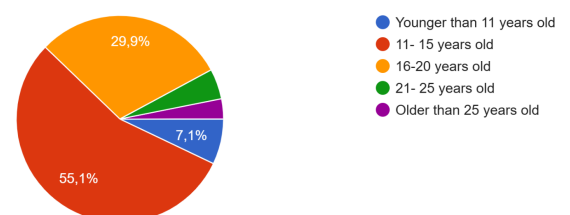
When asked to do a self-evaluation on their English level, none of the participants judged themselves to be beginners in English; the majority of them evaluated themselves as advanced English speakers, followed by Upper-intermediate speakers (29.1%), Intermediate speakers (12.6%), and Pre-intermediate speakers (3.9%). The high proficiency level of the participants shows that fanfiction continues to engage and appeal to individuals who are already confident in their English abilities. This aligns with the idea that fanfiction serves as a rich linguistic resource for those who are looking to expand their vocabulary and refine their fluency. The fact that so many participants rate their skills as advanced also reflects how consistent exposure to authentic, fan-created content helps reinforce language competence over time. It supports the argument that fanfiction communities not only entertain, but also provide immersive environments for ongoing second language development.

Figures 4 and 5

How often do you read fanfiction in English?  
127 respostas



How old were you when you started reading fanfiction in English?  
127 respostas



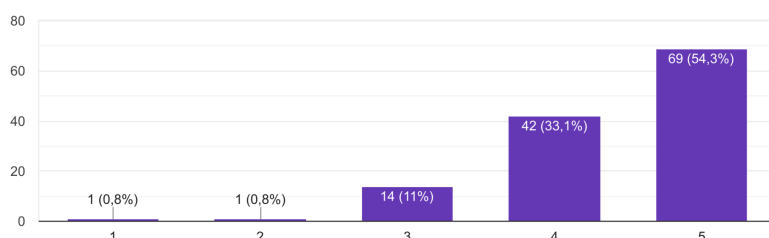
Regarding their experience with online fanfiction reading in English, most participants

(81%) began reading during their pre-teen and teenage years, followed by those who started during childhood (7.1%), and those who started during adulthood (11.9%). As for the frequency of exposure to this content, for most of the participants, fanfiction reading in English is part of their daily routine being part of it multiples times a week (79,5%), followed by once a week (10,2%), once a month (7,1%) and once every 3 months (3,1%).

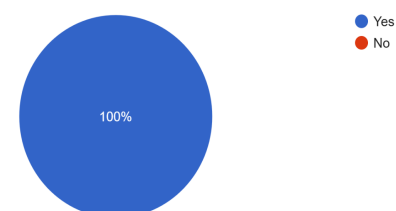
This demonstrates both long-term and short-term consistency, as most participants have a long history of fanfiction reading and incorporate it into their daily or weekly routines. Due to the pre-existing emotional connection people have with the characters present in fanfiction and the wide variety of stories that can be found under each fandom's name, people can find it easier to engage with it over time and make it part of their routine, instead of stories with original characters. This is great for motivation and keeping readers engaged with reading, especially those who read mostly in a foreign language. Having a constant source of comprehensible input in English will help maintain and develop your skills, even if it is not the primary goal of your reading habits.

Figures 6, 7 and 8

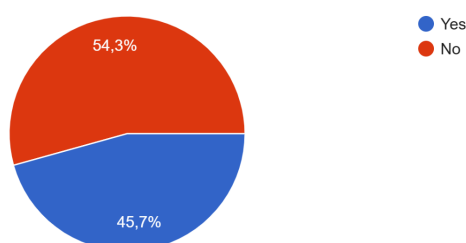
On a scale from 1-5 how much reading fanfiction helped your development on the English language?  
127 respuestas



Would you recommend fanfiction reading as a tool for language learning?  
127 respuestas



Did you use fanfiction to help your language learning process consciously?  
127 respuestas



When asked about fanfiction reading as a tool for language learning, 54,3% of the participants voted the highest option on the scale on how fanfiction reading helped their development in the English language, followed by number 4 on the scale (33,1%), number 3 (11%), and 1 and 2 with 0,8% each. All of the participants recommend fanfiction reading as a tool for language learning.

Deepening the questions about the role of fanfiction on their learning process, the participants were asked if they used fanfiction reading as a tool consciously, in which 54,3% selected that they did not. Although most participants did not use fanfiction for learning purposes, they recognized its benefits for English language development and would unanimously recommend it to others. This indicates that the benefits of this habit are readily apparent, even to those who engage in it mindlessly, as evidenced by the majority of participants who reported significant gains from fanfiction reading, primarily for entertainment.

The next question on the questionnaire was directed at those who used strategies to improve their learning while reading fanfiction, to understand which methods they used to reach that goal. The question, a short paragraph, gathered 58 responses. Many respondents mentioned searching for and writing the meanings of new words, using context clues, and pushing themselves to read the entire sentence, even when encountering new words. Some participants also highlighted strategies to improve pronunciation, such as reading aloud to practice their speaking and become accustomed to the sound of new words.

Participant 24 summarized many of the responses about the strategies and the experience of learning through fanfiction.

I overcame my fear of not knowing enough vocabulary by just piecing things together from the context. It helped me a LOT! I used to be afraid of books and articles in English because my vocabulary wasn't that big, but after reading fanfiction for nine years straight, I now consider myself fluent. (PARTICIPANT 24)

This participant's experience provides a clear illustration of Krashen's (1982) Affective Filter Hypothesis. Initially, they struggled with anxiety due to the limited range of their vocabulary, which hindered their development by raising the affective filter. However, by engaging with comprehensible input that was both interesting and mostly understandable, they were able to learn using context clues. Furthermore, the informal nature of fanfiction created a low-anxiety environment, lowering the affective filter and helping a more effective language acquisition and learning process. Over the years, this constant exposure to enjoyable and comprehensible input led the participant to fluency, supporting Krashen's (1982) hypothesis fully.

Then, the participants were asked to identify the skills they believe were developed through fanfiction reading; they could select multiple answers. Vocabulary was the most voted skill among 91.3% of the participants, followed by reading (90.6%), grammar knowledge (68.5%), writing (63%), and speaking (26%).

For the final question, the participants were asked to freely share their thoughts on their experience with fanfiction reading and English learning. Most of the responses revolved around the same recurring themes, expansion of vocabulary, idioms, slangs and technical

language (AU's of specific contexts), increase of motivation to read on a foreign language, fandom engagement as a motivator to practice the language interacting with other fans on online communities, accessibility due to the large amount of free reading material in English.

The interest factor plays a significant role in the learning process through fanfiction. People feel compelled to read more and push themselves to learn the language to access more content featuring their favorite characters or celebrities, as exemplified by participant 14.

Also, reading fanfictions of things that I like as a learning method sounds less like studying and more like enjoying myself. Studying can be tough, and sometimes you might get lazy or start procrastinating. However, if you approach it in a way that you enjoy, you can learn so much more. (PARTICIPANT 14)

This excerpt exemplifies Dornyei's (1998) study on how motivation is a crucial part of learning. Without it, achieving goals or persisting in long-term language learning is challenging. Fanfiction is a great motivator to keep the learner's interest in the target language because it relies on people's interests.

As mentioned briefly before, affinity spaces were also mentioned by the participants as great motivators and a tool for language learning. Participant 110 named them as a great way to keep you engaged in learning a language because there are huge writing communities where people can share their work and find works to read, and both readers and writers exchange ideas and feedback. This draws on Jenkins' (2006) work on participatory culture and affinity spaces as motivator factors for learning.

Participants reported long-term and frequent exposure to English through fanfiction, with many starting their reading habits during adolescence and continuing into adulthood. This consistent exposure, combined with the emotional connection to familiar characters and fandoms, enhances motivation and the creation of sustainable reading routines. These findings align with theories of second language acquisition that support the importance of input, interest, and emotional engagement.

Although most participants did not consciously read fanfiction with a learning goal, they still recognized significant gains in vocabulary, reading skills, and grammar knowledge. Many also described using active learning strategies, such as guessing meaning from context, looking up unfamiliar words, and reading aloud, further reinforcing the pedagogical value of this informal practice. The strong evidence of fanfiction as a recommended language learning tool supports the idea that digital, interest-driven literacies can be a complement to formal education, especially when they involve immersive, authentic, and enjoyable language input.

Ultimately, this study demonstrates that fanfiction is not only a space for entertainment and community, but also a powerful, learner-centered environment that promotes language development through meaningful interaction, motivation, and sustained

exposure to the target language.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Online affinity spaces have become a great example of low-anxiety environments for those in the process of learning a new language. The passion people have for their objects of interest benefits them in ways that go beyond emotional relief and fulfillment; it also drives them to academic development and the enhancement of their language skills.

Focusing on English learners, this study examined, through data analysis of a Google Forms questionnaire, the benefits that could be attained by those who frequently engage with online fanfiction reading. In which the participants responded in favor of the hypothesis raised in this paper that fanfiction reading could work as a helper for language learning. Through a self-evaluation, participants answered questions about their engagement with fanfiction and the English language. Most were avid fanfiction readers for years, incorporating it into their weekly routine. The high frequency and consistency of this habit provided a rich source of comprehensible input, leading to significant growth in their English skills. Participants reported substantial improvements in their reading skills, as well as other abilities, resulting in an overall enhancement of their proficiency.

The gains from informal sources due to the emotional engagement of the learners and the enhancement of the absorption of input through the comfort brought by fanfiction were caused by the decrease of the affective filter on the individual's brain, exemplifying Krashen's (1982) hypothesis, as discussed in the theoretical framework of this paper. The results of this research were great supporters of the theories used to build this study. Online fanfiction reading served as a continuous source of input for the participants, serving as a motivator, even if unconsciously, it kept them in touch with the target language in a safe and comfortable environment using the emotional connection in favor of their learning.

Finally, this study fulfilled its goal by showing that online fanfiction reading can be a tool for language learning, combining personal interest with authentic language use. Fanfiction tightens the gap between entertainment and education, and it should be recognized as a valuable supplement to traditional language learning methods, capable of enhancing learners' proficiency, confidence, and motivation through immersive and meaningful literacy practices.

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## **APPENDIX**

### **Fanfiction reading as a helper to second language learning**

#### **1. How old are you?**

**13 -17 years old**

**18 - 23 years old**

**24 - 29 years old**

**30+ years old**

#### **2. Where are you from?**

#### **3. What is your level of education?**

**Middle school**

**High school**

**University**

**Post graduation**

#### **4. Have you attended English classes in school?**

**Yes**

**No**

#### **5. Have you attended an English course?**

**Yes**

**No**

#### **6. How would you classify your English level?**

**Beginner**

**Pre-Intermediate**

**Intermediate**

**Upper-Intermediate**

**Advanced**

**7. How old were you when you started reading fanfiction in English?**

**Younger than 11 years old**

**11- 15 years old**

**16-20 years old**

**21- 25 years old**

**Older than 25 years old**

**8. How often do you read fanfiction in English?**

**Once every 3 months**

**Once a month**

**Once a week**

**Multiple times a week**

**9. What other media do you consume in English?**

**Books and magazines**

**Films and TV Series**

**Social media**

**Music**

**Other**

**10. On a scale from 1-5, how much reading fanfiction helped your development in the English language?**

**1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5**

**11. Would you recommend fanfiction reading as a tool for language learning?**

**Yes**

**No**

**12. Did you use fanfiction to help your language learning process consciously?**

**Yes**

**No**

**13. If so, what strategies were used to help your learning?**

**14. What skills do you think were developed through fanfiction reading?**

**Reading**

**Writing**

**Vocabulary**

**Speaking**

**Grammar knowledge**

- 15. Use this space to share more about your experience with fanfiction reading and English learning.**