

# The Impact of Online Informal Learning of English (OILE) Through Fandom Participation

## El Impacto del Aprendizaje Informal del Inglés en Línea a Través de la Participación del Fandom

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**Abstract:**

This research set out to explore the role that online fandom participation had in the language learning process of pre-graduate English teachers in Mexico. To this end, the data were collected by means of five individual interviews with students, who had previously identified themselves as former participants of online fandom and who claimed that they significantly developed their English skills as a result of this fandom participation. The evidence indicates that by becoming invested in fan communities of predominantly English-speaking media, the participants became fluent in the target language, mostly by themselves. This learning took place outside the language classroom in an engaging and stress-free environment; regardless of whether the participants were conscious of it or not. This study's implications suggest as technology and education move forward, alternatives to incorporate extra-curricular tools aligned with the learners' interest and in the benefit of their language learning process, should be sought.

**Keywords:**

Online Informal English learning, fandom participation, communicative language, pre-graduate English teachers

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**Resumen:**

Esta investigación se propuso explorar el papel que tuvo la participación del fandom en línea en el proceso de aprendizaje de idiomas de estudiantes-profesores de pre-grado de inglés en México. Para lograr este fin, se recogieron datos a través de cinco entrevistas individuales con estudiantes, que previamente se habían identificado como participantes de un fandom en línea y consideraban haber desarrollado en gran medida sus habilidades en inglés como resultado de esta participación en el fandom. La evidencia indica que al involucrarse en comunidades de fans predominantemente de habla inglesa, los participantes adquirieron fluidez en la lengua meta, principalmente por sí mismos. Este aprendizaje tuvo lugar fuera del aula de idiomas en un ambiente atractivo y libre de estrés, independientemente de si los participantes eran conscientes de ello o no. Las implicaciones de este estudio sugieren que a medida que la tecnología y la educación avanzan, se deben buscar alternativas para incorporar herramientas extracurriculares alineadas con los intereses de los estudiantes y en beneficio de su proceso de aprendizaje de idiomas.

**Palabras Clave:**

Aprendizaje informal de inglés en línea (OILE), participación en fandom, lenguaje comunicativo, profesores de inglés pre-graduados

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### Introduction

The phenomenon of fandom and fandom activities, such as fanfiction, fan art, fansubbing, fandubbing, and fandom discourse, among others, have long intrigued the minds of young people—and older people alike—throughout the years. A rising interest in engaging with people with similar interests; in expanding fictional worlds through fan works; or simply passing the time by enjoying online media, has had a significant impact on the growth of fan communities

over the years. A fandom is understood as a community of fans: of a TV show, a movie franchise, a book series, a band or a singer, a YouTuber, a Twitch streamer, an anime, an actor, or an actress. The possibilities are endless and there are fandoms for all sorts of things. These fans can be either active in their community as content creators or as passive spectators of this content made by fellow fans.

Being part of an online community of fans allows people "to make friends, and joining a fandom means inheriting

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references, inside jokes, even physical social events without having to do any of the usual legwork” (Nicholson, 2020, 11:06-11:14). Therefore, fandoms and the participation within them have allowed for communication between people who do not even know each other personally or who may live cross-country from each other, or who do not even share the same first language. It is no secret that English is widely spoken on the Internet, so if a fan would want to seek more content from their favourite media, they would come across content in English. The desire to participate and to meet other people, as well as to be a part of a whole other side of the fandom may have given people the possibility to become fluent in a new language through its consumption as a sort of informal learning of the language.

The discussion of this informal learning through fandom participation—specifically fanfiction—was observed in a group of pre-graduate students undertaking a B.A. in Teaching English as a Foreign Language at a public University in Mexico. As part of the program’s admission requirements, students need to demonstrate English proficiency through a written examination and an oral interview. With this in mind, at the beginning of this B.A. students are expected to be fluent in the language; nonetheless, if they learned the language via formal or informal instruction is not inquired since it is not the focus of the admission process. Concerning the latter form of instruction, literature indicates that online communities, entertainment, and out of the classroom environments offer opportunities to develop learners’ language skills (Black, 2009; Kubota, 2011; Sauro, 2017; Sockett, 2014). Mindful of this, and as one of the researchers has experienced learning English in a similar way, this research intends to find out the role that fandom participation played in the learning language process of five B.A. students who identified online communities as pivotal and unintentional educational tools for the development of their English skills.

### A Brief History of Fandom

Online fandom and fandom activities may be perceived as recent developments due to their online nature when in reality they are older than many of those who currently partake in them. For instance, readers’ reactions to Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s decision to kill his extremely popular and beloved character Sherlock Holmes in 1893—after seven years of publishing—was major, and above all, unexpected. It is said that readers formed “Let’s Keep Holmes Alive” clubs and sent angry letters to Conan Doyle reprimanding him, calling him a brute; moreover, the magazine *Holmes* was published on reportedly lost around 20,000 subscriptions. Eventually, the backlash and insistence from Sherlock fans wore Conan Doyle down, he succumbed and wrote more stories featuring the

detective (Armstrong, 2016). Mobilizing and organizing as fans has been a thing of the past and remains to this day.

It is believed that the word *fandom* first appeared in the printing press as early as 1903 about sports fans (Rutherford-Morrison, 2016). Afterward, and with the popularization of the American science fiction magazine *Amazing Stories* during the 1920s, the first “official” fandom was born. Fans went from exchanging letters to organizing fan conventions, where they could meet each other and discuss their interests, further developing the community they had created—something still practiced today— (The History of Fandom, 2019).

However, when discussing the contemporary era of fandom, it is believed that it began with the creation of the extremely popular—and at the time ground-breaking—TV show *Star Trek* (1966-1969). *Star Trek* fanfiction is a huge part of fandom history for many reasons. A small subsection of the show’s fanbase is credited with coining the term *slash fiction* which refers to “...a subgenre of fanfiction involving male/male pairings, usually non-canonical male/male pairings (Romano, 2016). The term originates from classic *Star Trek* fandom; early fans who shipped Kirk and Spock stylized the ship name as “Kirk/Spock,” which led to calling the whole genre “slash” (Romano, 2016). Even though the term is not used as frequently as before, the genre is still one of the most popular across numerous fanfiction archiving websites, such as FanFiction.net and Wattpad. Currently, the genre is the most popular in Archive Of Our Own. Other popular genres are: *canon fic* or *in-universe fic*, in which the text is built off of the original universe; *AU*, which stands for Alternative Universe counts with many subgenres, but it generally refers to where characters are put into a new universe, setting or timeline; *crossover*, in which different sources are combined: *Lord of the Rings* and *Star Trek* (Romano, 2016).

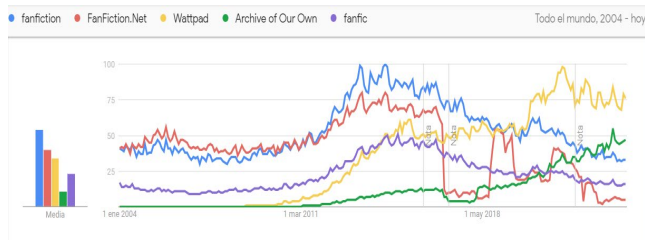
One of, if not the very first, *Star Trek* fanfiction of the contemporary era of fandom was a piece of *slash fiction* titled “The Ring of Soshern,” a 40-page Kirk/Spock novel written by Jennifer Guttridge in 1968. *Star Trek* fanfiction used to be distributed through fanzines at the time—publications organized and self-published by fans—. However, Guttridge who only shared her writing with a close circle, had her writing published without permission in the highly controversial fanzine *Alien Brothers* in 1987. It is important to understand that due to the era slash fiction was very controversial and underground, so Guttridge was afraid of the creators and actors of *Star Trek* finding out about her writing and even taking her to court for it (*The Ring of Soshern - Fanlore*, n.d.). This contrasted with the first ever *Star Trek* fanzine, *Spockanalia*, which is reported by Tenuto and Tenuto (2014) on the show’s official website as so popular that it

was even endorsed by the creators and actors of the show, who recommended it and even sent letters to be published in it. Tenuto and Tenuto (2014) report that some fans who worked on the fanzine even got credits in official Star Trek publishing afterward.

Fanfiction is not the only fan creation one can create, though. Many fans engage in the creation of fan art, which are drawings —both digital and traditional works— of characters from the source, be it *in-universe* or in an *alternative universe* scenario. Fansubbing refers to another practice that tends to be more popular among the anime community; in this fandom, fansubbers are people or teams who know Japanese, and by themselves, take the time to edit translated subtitles into original episodes of the series. Similarly, fan translations of *manga* which are Japanese comics, or *manhwa* which refers to Korean comics, among other similar publications, are commonly shared on websites free of charge thanks to non-profits fan groups called scanlation groups. Fandub refers to fans actually voicing the dialogues of the original work into another language; however, fandubbed parodies in which the dialogues are changed in order to transform the work are quite popular as well.

Since its early days fandom has grown exponentially thanks to the Internet. During the last two decades, this growth can be seen peaking in 2014 as shown in a fandom related terms search in Google Trends (see below Figure 1). Moreover, as stated by Black (2008, p. xiii-xiv) “although fanfiction in its various print-based forms has existed for an indeterminate amount of time, the advent of the Internet has had a profound effect on the scope of the genre, as it has enabled large numbers of fans from across the globe to meet online to share and take apart in substantive discussion of fictions produced online by their peers”.

Figure 1. Fanfiction and other related terms' popularity between January 2004 and January, 2024 by Google Trends



The development of technology and the growth of these fan communities allows fans to interact globally with little to no limits. As such, it is common to see fans who are not native English speakers post in English in order to reach a wider audience. And as literature that will be discussed in the following section indicates, online fan communities can assist learners' language development.

## English Language Learning and Fandom

Advancements in technology and the youth's presence in online platforms in which they can engage with discussions of media that interests them may lead to them engaging in Online Informal Learning of English (OILE), in case they are not English speakers already. OILE refers to the learning of English outside the classroom without the learner seeking to purposefully learn the language; rather, the acquisition is happening through the online activities the learner is engaged in (Sockett, 2014). OILE's relationship with online fandom participation is quite easy to see as through the involvement with the different fandom activities, whether as an active participant or a passive content consumer, the learner is exposed to input and valuable interactions with peers from around the world which support their language learning journey. Through literature such as Sockett and Kusyk (2015), it is noted that the English Language Learner (ELL) seems to be far more interested in the target language and reach a higher proficiency level when they consume the language through media they enjoy, and without the classroom pressure to perform at a certain level.

Such is the case study presented by Rebecca Black's (2006), about Tanaka Nanako, an 11-year-old Chinese girl who moved with her family to Canada. Nanako did not speak any English. However, after identifying herself as a non-native English speaker insecure about her grammar and writing abilities she received other online users' support, encouragement, and constructive criticism on her grammar. This way, Nanako developed her English skills throughout the years, as observed by Black (2006). Similarly, Henry Jenkins (1992) in his book *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*, states that fans make meta connections of the media they enjoy by interpreting —poaching— texts and media, discussing among each other, and consequently, developing their language skills. The results from these social discussions or interactions are far more meaningful for the reader than the original text itself. This is similar to the comments Nanako received on her writing.

As previously mentioned, often non-native English speakers will share fan content in English in order to reach a wider audience. Such is the case for another of Black's (2009) studies participants: Grace. At the time of the study, Grace was a popular fanfiction writer from the Philippines. She had published multiple multi-chapter stories on FanFiction.net since 2001. Even though English is one of the Philippines' official languages, Grace did not consider it her first language, but her third. Black analyses one of her writings “Heart Song”, in which Grace writes in the Author's Notes (A/N in fandom-talk) that English is not her first language. According to Black, Grace does this “...to highlight her status as an ELL as a

means of garnering understanding and support from the audience” (Black, 2009, p. 409). This reflects her self-identification as an English language learner and the association between OILE and fandom participation. In that sense, Stebbins (2007, as cited in Kubota, 2011) claims that casual leisure pursues pleasure and enjoyment. As such, Kubota (2011) likens language learning to the following types of casual leisure: “...passive entertainment (e.g. watching TV, reading books, listening to music)... sociable conversation (e.g. gossip, ‘idle chatter’)...” among other types. Instead of likening these two concepts, this paper aims to embrace them both: online entertainment and the sociable language learning opportunities it provides.

This poaching phenomenon is observable when being on the Internet. Visiting the profiles of people who participate in fandom and reading the information they include in their social media profiles such as age, gender, nationality, posts, and most importantly fandom interests, we see a variety of intermingling media sources. The inclusion and sharing of this information allow fans to find and interact with each other, granting them the opportunity to discuss and share recommendations of other writings about the media they are both interested in and finding community. As Kubota (2011) claims: “...one benefit of casual leisure is the development of interpersonal relationships.” Moreover, in comment sections of fanfiction archives such as Archive Of Our Own, we find —similar to Nanako’s case— that non-native speakers often receive encouraging messages and compliments on their English, which motivates them to keep on posting and learning the language, ultimately developing their English skills. Discussion and reflection on texts in these forums also reflect the readers’ skills to discuss not only the form of a text, but the meaning of the whole, as well as the language used in engaging in meta-talk, a valuable language skill for both native and non-native speakers alike (Black, 2005). In this sense, Black (2005) proposes that this skill allows readers to reach a higher level of English literacy in a non-intimidating, informal environment —unlike a classroom— through the practicing of peer reviewing, giving constructive criticism to authors, and collaborating with each other to reach a goal of co-writing or *beta-reading* a text, which is fandom-talk for proofreading, a common practice in fanfiction writing circles. Thus, the informal consumption of media in English has allowed non-native speakers to receive input that they themselves choose, and scaffold it with their learning of the language.

This engagement in media in English for the ELL’s informal learning may result in the perception of the language as a communicative tool first and foremost. Thus, letting go of the common focus on form over meaning that they encounter in the classroom and giving

way to “structure determined by usage” (Godwin-Jones, 2018, p. 12). Moreover, how frequently the ELL watches or engages with content in English, even for their leisure, may help determine their proficiency level, their own writing skills in the target language, as well as knowledge of vocabulary items. Sockett and Kusyk (2015) found in their research that 22 participants, 12 of whom were frequent viewers of TV shows in English online, while the other 10 were familiar with the shows from having watched them in French on TV. The 22 participants were asked to write fanfiction —which would not be graded— of certain shows using language chunks such as *how do you know* or *do I have to*; the results showed that the frequent English viewers, apart from having written more words, demonstrated a better understanding of the chunks and even had a broader vocabulary than their counterparts (Sockett & Kusyk, 2015).

In addition to the latter, the development of this study was driven by the personal experience of one of the researchers as someone who had self-learned English in similar informal ways as illustrated in the review of literature. Thus, informed by the literature and aided by an insider’s motivation, the question that this paper aims to answer is:

What is the role of fandom participation in the self-learning language process of pre-graduate English language teachers?

## Methodology

In order to answer the research question, this study was framed as a qualitative case study in which purposeful sampling was employed. This type of sampling is defined as selecting individuals that have experienced the central phenomenon of the study (Creswell, 2014). The participants’ selection criteria entailed: to have been a participant—either active or passive— of online fandom in the past, and to consider having greatly developed their English skills as a result of fandom participation. For the purpose of recruiting participants who fulfilled these requirements, fellow students from the B.A. in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) were personally approached and briefly asked about their experience learning English. To gauge the participants’ potential experience with fandom and English learning, the preliminary questions inquired whether they had learned English formally or informally; if informally, by what means. The subsequent question asked if they knew what fandom was and if they considered they had learned English mainly through fandom. The result of this procedure was five eligible participants. There was gender variation as they were three females and two males whose ages ranged between 19-22 years old at different stages in their B.A. studies.

An interview was selected as the appropriate data collection method bearing in mind that “the personal histories and worldviews of individuals will best answer the researcher’s questions” (Saldaña, 2011, p. 31). It was a semi-structured interview consisting of 14 open-ended questions regarding the participants’ previous experiences with fandom, and the impact these had in their English development. The interviewing process was carried out online, through Google Meet, due to scheduling conflicts and practicality. Nevertheless, as an ethical consideration, interviews took place in the participants’ time availability, during the first semester of 2023. Likewise, the participants were informed they could keep the cameras off if they wished; nonetheless, they all preferred to have them on. Other ethical considerations implied delivering prior to the interview, a Participant Information Sheet (PIS) and a consent form via Google Forms, so that the students would have time to read about the project and make an informed decision about their participation (Cohen et al., 2013). The PIS contained information about why the participants were chosen, the purpose of the study, what their participation entailed, how they would remain confidential, and most importantly, their right to refuse or withdraw their participation with no consequences whatsoever. Participants were promised confidentiality, but not anonymity since it would mean remaining anonymous even to the researchers (Bell & Waters, 2018), something that was not possible since they were approached purposefully.

The recorded interviews were transcribed onto a Google Docs file with no aid of third-party software. Thematic analysis through inductive coding was employed. The first two stages of data analysis included familiarizing with data by reading and highlighting excerpts in order to assign preliminary codes that would describe the content. The following stage implied searching for patterns within the codes across the different interviews to define, in the following phase, the themes.

## Findings

Six themes emerged from the participants’ interview data: The media that had introduced them to online communities, their ages and social media networks in initial fandom interaction, type of fandom content consumption, their process of engagement with online fandom communities, how their interest to learn English was piqued by these fandoms, and their current fandom participation status.

### Media and online communities

The source materials that initiated the participants into online communities was mostly unsurprising due to their popularity at the time. Participant 1 was into TV shows (mostly DC shows, such as *Arrow*, *The Flash*, or

*Supergirl*), young adult books (*Twilight* and *The Hunger Games*), and in recent times, K-pop. Participant 2 was interested mostly in music (artists like Lana del Rey, Lady Gaga, and the band My Chemical Romance), cinema (director Tim Burton), memes, and more recently K-pop too. Participant 3 recalls videogame *Animal Crossing* and later on music with artist Owl City. Participant 4 and 5 both were interested in the popular group: One Direction and lately K-pop groups, and K-dramas in the case of Participant 4.

### Initial fandom interaction

The participants first encountered online communities between the ages of 11-14 years old. Both Facebook and Wattpad were common websites for fandom activities, unlike Tumblr and Twitter. Some other web spaces mentioned by participant 3 were blogs and forums, in which they interacted with other fans of the videogame *Animal Crossing: New Leaf*.

### Type of fandom content consumption

According to the literature, fan fiction often features as a catalyst to language learning. In this study, three out of the five participants reported have been interested in it. In this regard, when talking about the kind of content consumed, Participant 1 declared his involvement with fanfiction:

Fanfic. A lot of fanfics. I was a Wattpad girly, definitely. My dream was always to write on there, but I was never like, um, brave enough to share anything that I wrote.

Similarly, Participant 4 recalls about her experience with fanfiction, but in this case, she was more of an active user by sharing her writings:

I- became very interested in umm fanfics, I-I used to read them on, not on Wattpad but on Facebook. I remember many people wrote many fanfics and I did as well.

For them however, fan fiction —both reading and writing— was an activity done in Spanish, not in English. On the other hand, participant 5 looks back on it as something she did both in Spanish and in English, which shows an initial active engagement with the target language. When asked which websites she used to read fanfiction participant 5 declared:

No, I think it was only on Facebook, and also in Wattpad...I think sometimes I left some comments there...both [languages].

Even though fan fiction was experienced by the majority of participants, it was a surprise to see that it was not the universal experience as first assumed based on both the

literature review and personal assumptions based on experience.

### Process of engagement

Participants' timeline of discovery of fan communities in English were staggeringly similar. Firstly, they already had some basic knowledge of English that they had formally learned at school, then they would consume the source material, stumble upon fan communities in Spanish on websites like Facebook, afterwards they would notice the larger communities in English, which would be motivation to interact with these, acquiring the language rather than consciously and formally learning it. Participant 1 recalls:

...I think that more than learning the language I acquired it, because I completely immersed myself in the language, like, it was music, TV shows, movies, books, everything that I was consuming was in English, so I think that like, really influenced like, my vocabulary...

Extracts like this demonstrate the participants' perception on their improvement of English, particularly their vocabulary, as a result of interactions with online communities. Likewise, it is observable how they transitioned from consuming first language material to consumption of source material in English.

### Learning Motivations

In relation to how these online English-speaking communities had motivated the participants to learn the language, participant 5 asserted:

Um, yes, not like consciously, but unconsciously, yes, because there was a moment that I realized that I knew English, not so much in that moment, but like, a lot of vocabulary and that's when I said "Oh, I like it, so maybe I should start learning more."

Participant 5 even stated that this interest in English, which came from the artists that she enjoyed, is what set her on the path to entering the TEFL B.A., claiming a desire to study anything related to the language.

Comparably, participant 4's statement reflects how engagement with fandom communities had boosted his interest to learn the language informally:

...I started to learn English at school, but at some point, I stopped, but by watching interviews or reading in English about the things of the artists that I liked um, made me get more motivated into continuing to study the language..."

### Current fandom participation status

Lastly, even though participants were still interested in fandom, they reported to not be as invested or as active as they once were when as teenagers. For instance, participant 2 states that he still participates on Facebook groups sharing opinions about shows such as *RuPaul's Drag Race*, similarly to participant 4's participation in groups related to his favourite musician. Other participants were more passive or disconnected from the consumption of both the source material and fan creations at the moment of the interview, despite their interest in music groups.

### Discussion

The participants' interest in the original media and the English fan content they encountered on the Internet had them engaged and ready to receive input they otherwise could not have found in the language classroom. The gradual increase on the participants' English skills as a by-product of fan content consumption and communication happened without the ELL being aware of it. This might be in alignment with the idea that proficiency in the target language improves when the ELL consumes it through media they enjoy.

The online, informal input that the participants chose themselves allowed them to scaffold their learning of the language. Participants referred to the language presented to them as real and they wished to reach that native-like level through their interaction with other English speakers. Searching to connect and communicate with others in English shaped the participants' view of the language: it was a communicative tool for them, rather than merely focusing on its grammatical form like it is so common in classrooms. This needs to communicate in a real setting with other real people bears a similar dynamic to that of naturalistic second language acquisition (Sockett and Kusyik, 2015).

Despite taking a different focus than previous research, since our participants' English was not being studied as it developed in real time, but rather reminiscing of their language learning process; our results align with the principles that engagement (Sockett, 2014), entertainment (Kubota, 2011), and communication (Godwin-Jones, 2018) in online communities served as great tools. Furthermore, even though not all participants were active and productive members of their respective fandoms as initially thought, being part of these online communities was instrumental in the development of their English. Thus, frequent consumption of media in the target language, as shown in Sockett and Kusyik's (2015) paper, in which they analysed the frequency effects in the uptake of chunks of language from participation in web-based activities, may lead non-native speakers to a

broader vocabulary and better understanding of language items such as chunks.

### Conclusion

By becoming invested in online communities, the five ELLs interviewed for this paper were able to become fluent in a new language informally, mostly by themselves. This learning took place outside the language classroom in an engaging and stress-free environment; regardless of whether the participants were conscious of it or not. This contributed throughout time as building blocks for their language development. Moreover, the wish to be part of a community helped in making the language seen as a communicative tool thus, remaining significant and memorable.

As technology and education move forward, a way to either incorporate the learners' interests from outside the classroom to aid them learn the language, or to encourage learners to seek out these communities in a responsible and safe way could benefit their English learning.

At the beginning of this research project, there were some expectations held due to the insider perspective in online fandom by one of the researchers. Some of these anticipations had to do with the type of source material that was of interest to the participants and their involvement mainly in the world of fan fiction either through reading or writing or both, their initial age of involvement, teenagers, with these online communities and the social media networks they had resourced. However, as Saldaña (2011) suggests the obvious should not be taken for granted; as the expected might not always happen, and hunches, at times, can be right and at others, wrong. In this sense, from the development of this paper, it was learnt that some hunches were indeed right and others were completely off.

### Limitations and research contribution

One of the main limitations of this study has to do with a time consideration, which did not allow for a deeper exploration into the topic and a larger breadth of it. Thus, more time would have permitted recruiting and interviewing more participants through a snowballing sampling strategy. Likewise, richer data would have allowed delving further into the analysis. Nevertheless, although on a small research scale, this study shed light into an area that has been little explored in the literature, one that highlights the impact and transitioning of informal learning of English through online fandom into formal studying and execution of the language.

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