

Online Popular Culture in Language Learning: Reading and Writing Online Fanfiction

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Abstract: With the reach and accessibility that technology has provided, in particular the Internet, language learning has taken a different height. With the reach of the Internet worldwide, it is now very important to learn an international language, such as the English language, which the language most widely used in the Internet realm. Also, with the immense consumption and distribution of popular culture within the Internet, the concept of learning has evolved and given new meanings. One particular field that education researchers consider as a platform in language learning is the reading and writing of online fanfiction. This literature review examines a small number of research done so far on online fanfiction and its effects on learning the English language. In this review of studies of online fanfiction in language learning, the author discusses the participants of online fanfiction and the types of participation they engage in when reading or writing online fanfiction that thus lead to them learning about the English language.

Keywords: English language learners (ELL), English as a second language (ESL), language acquisition, language learning, online fanfiction.

1. Introduction

Fanfiction is fiction about characters or settings written by fans of the original work, rather than the original creators. It is the act of taking a story created by someone in the form of a book, television program or movie, and using it as a jumping-off point for new fiction within that world or across it. It is a channel for creative writing within a setting already defined by someone else; it is a way to share ideas with other fans, and means to explore facets of popular characters, themes, settings and plots (Black, 2005). The origins of fanfiction can be traced back to the 1930s pulp magazine *Fanzines*, and it enjoyed a surge in the late 1960s with the popularity of *Star Trek* (Thomas, 2006a). However, it is only in the 1990s that fanfiction was widely practiced by fans of television series, books, movies, and comic books. This was due to the surge of the Internet and the accessibility it offers to the fanfiction communities. Since then, online fanfiction has flourished and burst through the online scene especially with young adults and adolescents (Thomas, 2006b). In this sense, online fanfiction is “an element of popular culture that is ever growing in popularity as new technologies enable native and non-native English speaking fans from all over the globe to meet online to share, critique, and build upon each other’s fictions” (Black, 2005).

Online fanfiction has attracted quite a number of researchers in the fields of communication, arts, culture, and currently in the field of language learning. The reason that education researchers are interested in studying online fanfiction varies. Some researchers believe that online fanfiction is able to enhance and extend students’ literacy practices, such as reading and writing creatively and critically (Black, 2004, cited in Steinkuehler et al, 2005). Studying the writing of online fanfiction also allows researchers to learn how learning is accomplished in a participatory culture in which young people collectively pool their resources, i.e., sharing knowledge and getting latest information on their favourite stories (Alvermann, 2008). Through the study of students’ writing of online fanfiction, some researchers believe teachers will have a better understanding about student identity and self-representation. This is as because people who portray themselves in the virtual world as being someone other than the person that people in the real world perceive them to be, may have stories to tell that teachers, teacher educators, and researchers have not been privy to in the past (Alvermann, 2008).

The goal of this literature review is to examine the small number of studies done so far on online fanfiction in language learning. In particular, the review of the literature sought to answer these questions:

(1) Who are the people participating in reading and writing online fanfiction?; (2) How do they participate in reading and writing online fanfiction?; and (3) Is there any evidence on how reading and writing online fanfiction can enhance language learning? Through this literature review, the author also hopes that it would shed more light on the directions for research of online fanfiction in language learning.

2. Reviewing the Literature

This literature review reports on studies on the use of online fanfiction specifically in language learning (i.e., English language). Several major online research databases were researched in obtaining these studies (i.e., JSTOR, ProQuest, ScienceWiley, and SAGE). A few studies were also obtained from the Google Scholar search engine. The searches in all of these online databases were confined to the use of specific terms, such as “online fanfiction studies” or “reading and writing online fanfiction.” To explain, there were 743 studies found with the term “online fanfiction studies,” and 706 studies found in the electronic databases using the term “reading and writing online fanfiction.”

With the majority of these articles found in the Internet resources being commentaries, reviews, and essays on the use of online fanfiction, stringent selection of only empirical studies was done. Certain selection criteria were met to ensure that the studies were focused on the use of online fanfiction in language learning. First, the literature review focuses on only articles from peer-reviewed journals, such as *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, *E-Learning Journal*, *The Journal of American Culture*, *English in Education*, *The Reading Matrix*, *Australian Journal of Language and Literacy*, *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, and also e-books and periodicals, namely *The International Handbook of Virtual Learning Environments* and *A New Literacies Sampler*. Other studies done outside of this scope, that might employ different methods of research, different samples, and different types of online fanfiction activities were not reported. Second, the studies in this literature review were selected under the notions of language learning. Other studies that were done on writing online fanfiction, but within umbrellas of other fields, such as computer studies or communication studies were not included. Studies that suggested similar genres (i.e., fandom, fantasy writing), but did not use the terms mentioned previously, were excluded from the review. These steps were taken to minimize the review of irrelevant studies which might not be suitable for this literature review.

As many as 15 studies on the use of online fanfiction in learning the English language were found. All of the 15 studies on online fanfiction and language learning discuss about language education for both native and non-native speakers of the English language. They were published between the years 2002 to 2010. It must be noted that because of the nature of online fanfiction, the studies chosen tended to be more of the qualitative nature rather than quantitative. Fourteen of the studies applied qualitative research method. From these 14 studies, four are case studies; seven studies applied analysis of written discourse of the written response from the fanfiction writers and readers through the studies; and two studies are ethnographic studies. Only one study was conducted using a quantitative method, which is by using an online survey. All of the studies were done in the United States of America, except for one, which was conducted in Finland (Stepanova, 2007). All studies chosen were written in English language, regardless of whether they were written and published outside of English speaking countries.

3. Results and Findings

This literature review is presented in two main aspects, namely a) Participants in Online Fanfiction and Participation in Online Fanfiction. The reason this literature review is divided into these two parts is to show the participants in online fanfiction, (i.e., which range from children to young adults—most of which are within school-age limit) and to show the types of literacy practices (i.e., reading and writing activities) that they engage in the English language, that thus promote language learning for these online fanfiction enthusiasts, either formally or informally.

3.1.1 Participants: Readers and Writers of Online Fanfiction

Number of Participants. The numbers of participants vary across studies due to the research designs and methods that the researchers use in studying them. There are nine studies (60%) that had fewer than ten participants (i.e., Black, 2005; Black, 2006; Chandler-Olcott & Mahar, 2003; Herzing, 2007; Mackey & MacCaly, 2008; Thomas, 2006a; and Thomas, 2006b). These studies are mainly case studies (i.e., Black, 2006; Chandler-Olcott & Mahar, 2003; Thomas, 2006a; and Thomas, 2006b), studies that used analyses of written discourse (i.e., Kustritz, 2003; Mackey & MacCaly, 2008; Mazar, 2006), and an ethnographic study (i.e., Black, 2005). There is one study that had below ten participants and used a mixed-method design of case studies and analysis of written texts (i.e., Herzing, 2005). From the nine studies, three studies had only one participant (i.e., Black, 2005; Black, 2006; Mackey & MacCaly, 2008), three studies had two participants (i.e., Chandler-Olcott & Mahar, 2003; Thomas, 2006a; and Thomas, 2006b), one study had three participants (i.e., Herzing, 2005), one study had six participants (i.e., Kustritz, 2003), and lastly one study had ten participants (i.e., Mazar, 2006). There are three studies (20%) that had more than ten participants (i.e., Allington, 2007; Bury, 2006; Kem, 2005). Two of these studies use analysis of written discourse (i.e., Allington, 2007; Bury, 2006) and the other one used an online survey (i.e., Kem, 2005). Allington (2007) has eleven participants, Bury (2006) has 22 participants, and Kem (2005) has 143 respondents to her online survey. There are three studies (20%) that did not mention the number of their participants (i.e., Black, 2007; Blasingame, 2002; Stepanova, 2007).

Age Level. The age levels of participants in the selected studies vary across studies as well. From the fifteen studies selected, there are six studies (40%) that had young adults as their participants (i.e., Black, 2005; Black, 2006; Thomas, 2006a; Thomas, 2006b; Allington, 2007; Stepanova, 2007). In contrast, there are only four studies (26.7%) that had adults as their participants (i.e., Chandler-Olcott & Mahar, 2003; Herzing, 2005; Kem, 2005; Bury, 2006). Unfortunately, there are five studies (33.3%) that failed to mention the specific age level of their participants (i.e., Blasingame, 2002; Kustritz, 2003; Mazar, 2006; Black, 2007; Mackey & MacClay, 2008). The appeal of the online fanfiction to the younger generation may have contributed to the number of the participants in the studies to be more likely of young adults. However, it is a nice surprise to find that one study reported a senior online fanfiction writer, which is the study by Herzing (2007) in which the author had three participants from three different age levels (i.e., an 11-year old girl, a 70-year old professor, and a 19-year old college student). From this review of studies, it can be reported that majority of the studies focused on young adults and children, i.e., those in school-age range.

Nationalities of Participants. From the selected fifteen studies, there are twelve studies (80%) that had participants from the United States of America (i.e., Blasingame, 2002; Chandler-Olcott & Mahar, 2003; Kustritz, 2003; Herzing, 2005; Kem, 2005; Bury, 2006; Mazar, 2006; Thomas, 2006a; Thomas, 2006b; Allington, 2007; Mackey & MacClay, 2008). Meanwhile, there are only two studies (13.3%) that had Asian participants, and only one study (6.7%) that had European participants, because it was conducted in Europe (i.e., Finland). Interestingly, the studies that had two Asian participants were also done in the United States of America, and the participants are actually immigrants from China who are studying in the United States, and they do not speak English as the first language. In this regard, majority of these studies was done to study native speakers' use of online fanfiction in language learning, but, there are also studies that focused on the use of online fanfiction for non-native speakers in learning the English language.

3.1.2 *Participation: Reading and Writing Online Fanfiction*

Online Fanfiction Web Domains. The web domains that the participants use in reading, writing, or publishing their fanfiction works are almost equal in terms of public and private web domains. From the fifteen studies selected, seven studies (46.7%) reported on participants who publish their works on public fanfiction sites (i.e., Black, 2005; Black, 2006; Mazar, 2006; Thomas, 2006a; Thomas, 2006b; Black, 2007; Mackey & MacClay, 2008). Meanwhile, eight studies (53.3%) were done on participants who post their works in private group domains (i.e., Blasingame, 2002; Chandler-Olcott & Mahar, 2003; Kustritz, 2003; Herzing, 2005; Kem, 2005; Bury, 2006; Allington, 2007; Stepanova, 2007). The public fanfiction sites might allow participants to share or publish their works to more and different plethora of fanfiction enthusiasts, while the specific online fanfiction group sites allows only the members of those designated sites. Thus, both of these domains might have different appeals to researchers and online fanfiction readers/writers alike.

Purposes for Online Fanfiction Participation. All of the studies (100%) selected participants who are already engaged or involved with fanfiction prior to the studies. It is also reported that the participants in all of the studies are involved in the fanfiction as a leisure activity and not as a required activity from the schools, parents, or even the researchers themselves (i.e., Allington, 2007; Black, 2005; Black, 2006; Black, 2007; Blasingame, 2002; Bury, 2006; Chandler-Olcott & Mahar, 2003; Herzing, 2005; Kem, 2005; Kustritz, 2003; Mackey & MacClay, 2008; Mazar, 2006; Thomas, 2006a; Thomas, 2006b; Stepanova, 2007). In this regard, it is quite interesting to learn that these participants engaged in online fanfiction voluntarily (i.e., without being instructed by teachers), and more importantly because they are engaging in the many language learning activities in reading or writing online fanfiction on their own, such as reading critically, giving feedback, and writing creatively and analytically, among others.

Online Fanfiction Genres. The genres that fanfiction writers read and write vary across the studies. In five out of fifteen studies (33.3%), the participants read and write their fanfiction works based on Television series (i.e., Blasingame, 2002; Bury, 2006; Herzing, 2005; Kem, 2005; Mazar, 2006). In four studies (26.7%) the participants read and write fanfiction works based on 'anime' or Japanese animation (i.e., Black, 2005; Black, 2006; Black, 2007; Chandler-Olcott & Mahar, 2003). An equal number of the participants (26.7%) also read and write works based on books and novels (i.e., Allington, 2007; Stepanova, 2007; Thomas, 2006a; Thomas, 2006b). Two studies (13.3%) reported their participants used movies as the genre basis for their fanfiction activities (i.e., Kustritz, 2003; Mackey & MacClay, 2008). From the review, it is interesting to see that the participants in these studies chose a quite a range of online fanfiction genres to engage in (i.e., read, write, and publish). This implies that reading and writing online fanfiction vary across genres and appeal to many people with many different interests.

Online Fanfiction Themes. From the review of these studies, most of the participants focused on reading and writing online fanfiction based on the theme of science fiction. To illustrate, there are seven studies (46.7%) that reported participants' reading and writing online fanfiction based on the theme of science fiction (i.e., Black, 2006; Black, 2007; Herzing, 2005; Kem, 2005; Mazar, 2006; Stepanova, 2007; Thomas, 2006a). Meanwhile, there are three studies (20%) that focused on the theme of action adventure (i.e., Blasingame, 2002; Chandler-Olcott & Mahar, 2003; Mackey & MacClay, 2008). Three studies (20%) focused on the theme of eroticism (i.e., Allington, 2007; Bury, 2006; Kustritz, 2003); and two other studies (13.3%) focused on the theme of romance (i.e., Black, 2005; Thomas, 2006b). It can be posited that due to the nature of fanfiction (i.e., to re-create stories or characters from the original stories) the theme of science fiction seem best suit with what most of the studies focus on and the students' interest—especially those who are in the school-age level. The theme of science fiction is also very appealing to these participants due to the creative space that the online fanfiction can afford to its enthusiasts in terms of reading, writing, and discussing about their favorite science fiction-themed stories.

Intended Audience. The majority of studies reported that the participants' online fanfiction works is published for public viewing. Eight studies (53.3%) used public domains and the participants in these studies published their work for public viewing (i.e., Black, 2005; Black, 2006; Black, 2007; Mackey & MacClay, 2008; Mazar, 2006; Thomas, 2006a; Thomas, 2006b; Stepanova, 2007). Five studies (33.3%) focused on fanfiction on specific online societies that the participants intend to share works with (i.e., Blasingame, 2002; Bury, 2006; Herzing, 2005; Kem, 2005; Kustritz, 2003). Only two studies (13.3%) reported that the participants' works of fanfiction are intended for close friends and peers that they virtually know (i.e., Allington, 2007; Chandler-Olcott & Mahar, 2003). The fact that majority of participants publicly publish their fanfiction works shows that these students are practicing very important literate practices that thus lead to language learning. To illustrate, these literate practices include thinking about the quality of their writing (such as grammar, sentence structures, etc.) as well as their literature knowledge (such as development of characters and plots, themes, and settings, etc.). They publishing their works publicly also indicate that they allow their peers to read and give them feedback on their works—in which both parties practice critical thinking and communication skills.

Frequency of Reading and Writing Online Fanfiction. Seven studies (46.7%) reported that participants read and write online fanfiction on daily bases (i.e., Black, 2007; Kem, 2005; Kustritz, 2003; Mazar, 2006; Stepanova, 2007; Thomas, 2006a; Thomas, 2006b). Meanwhile, five studies (33.3%) reported participants' engagement with online fanfiction in various times (i.e., Black, 2005; Black, 2006; Bury, 2006; Blasingame, 2002; Herzing, 2005). Only one study (6.7%) focused on a weekly basis publishing of work (Mackey & MacClay, 2008). And, there are two studies (13.3 %) that did not mention of the frequency of rading and writing of the participants in their studies (i.e., Allington, 2007; Chandler-Olcott & Mahar, 2003). Even though many studies report varied time spent on the online

fanfiction sites, it is understandable with the nature of the Internet and online fanfiction being accessible and available within the readers and writers' own convenience. In this regard, the readers and writers of online fanfiction are motivated to read and write works of fanfiction in their own pace.

Language in Reading and Writing Online Fanfiction. All of the reading materials and writings produced by all of the participants were in the English language. However, there are twelve studies (80%) that reported on participants using only the English language as the medium of writing (i.e., Allington, 2007; Black, 2007; Blasingame, 2002; Chandler-Olcott, 2003; Herzing, 2005; Mahar, 2003; Kem, 2005; Kustritz, 2003; Mackey & MacClay, 2008; Mazar, 2006; Thomas, 2006a; Thomas, 2006b; Stepanova, 2007); whereas there are three studies (20%) that focused on participants' use of 'hybrid language,' or the use of English language with particular Japanese or Chinese words. These participants used hybrid language in order to show authenticity of the works they are based upon. These hybrid language are derivative from the genre of the writing itself, such as Japanese Anime (i.e., Black, 2005; Black, 2006; Bury, 2006). Three of the studies that focus on the use of hybrid language (i.e., Black, 2005; Black, 2006; Bury, 2006) specify that the reason for their choice was due to nature of the participants being English language learners (ELL). However, and more importantly, due to the fact that most of the participants are school-age children and that they are learning English as either the first or second language, it is reported that they are engaging in many language learning elements when they read and write online fanfiction. These language learning elements are not limited to them only reading and writing works of fanfiction, but also discussing about their works in details (i.e., in chat forums)—in which this promotes communication skills—and they also engage in higher order thinking skills to which they analyse and give feedback on each other's fanfiction works.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

From the studies reviewed, it is learned that online fanfiction has positive appeal and effect in students' language learning (i.e., Black, 2007; Herzing, 2005; Thomas, 2006a; Thomas, 2006b). From these studies of the use of online fanfiction, researchers managed to investigate participants' reading preferences, reading skills, writing skills, communication skills, and textual culture (i.e., Allington, 2007; Blasingame, 2002; Kustritz, 2003; Mazar, 2006). These studies also managed to provide evidence to the development of the literary skills and social practices in online fanfiction, such as English communication skills through chat forums and giving/receiving feedback on fanfiction works (i.e., Black, 2005; Black, 2006, Black, 2007; Bury, 2006; Chandler-Olcott & Mahar, 2003). In this sense, the researchers managed to find evidences of learning the English language taking place in online fanfiction where they managed to see the feedback and response of peers and audience of the online fanfiction and understanding of readers and author co-design the writing/reading space—all of which were done in the English language between native and non-native speakers of English (Black, 2005). Language development within the consumers of online fanfiction is also evident where studies found that fanfiction readers and writers develop codes and conventions to govern themselves (Mackey & MacClay, 2008) especially in the interrelations between fanfiction and its canonical source (Stepanova, 2007). Moreover, it is found that online fanfiction can enhance and extend students' literacy practices (Steinkuehler et al., 2005); create participatory cultures where writers may pool resources—learn about the English language and culture (Alvermann, 2008); and also give teachers better evidence about student identity and self-representation, especially for international students who are learning English as a second language in English-speaking countries (Alvermann, 2008).

Albeit small in number, all 15 studies in this literature review espouse great support for online fanfiction, especially to the fact that online fanfiction can enhance students' literacy practices and language learning skills. In all, online fanfiction has attracted many scholars and researchers to study it and its societies. However, as evident with only 15 studies that had been found so far in the language learning field, the focus on online fanfiction as a tool for language learning is still considered in its infant stage. Most of the studies reviewed have concentrated on small-scale level of its use in learning the English language as first or second language and language acquisition. Also, most of these studies have found great values in the use of online fanfiction in language learning—but have not really mentioned some of its possible limitations. Therefore it is worthwhile to see studies done in a larger, deeper, and more globalized (i.e., international) scale to see the possible successes or limitations of reading and writing online fanfiction in language learning.

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