Fanfiction as an Academic Tool for Advanced Language Fluency: A Study

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ABSTRACT: In this globalized world, a thorough grasp of the English language has mushroomed as an inexorable necessity than an obligation. Traditional language learning is often turning out to be an involuntary process, alienating learners and thereby posing bigger challenges to second language teaching. Given the ongoing diversified technological revolution, an informal user-friendly ambience was created, making learning an uncomplicated and stress-free exercise. Digital platforms aid in several ways for learning languages - such as online language courses and special purpose mobile applications. Exposure to the language is vital in the learning process and social media can be of great help here. There is no better choice as a practice ground than social media and its associated forms. Fanfiction forums are the most popular reading and writing communities on the Internet. This paper attempts to throw light on how fanfiction can be useful in the task-based language teaching method for attainment of advanced fluency in reading and writing skills. A looming literary sensation and a source of entertainment, fanfictions of prominent literary works and visual arts are widely read and accepted by masses. This fictional writing can be incorporated into a higher-level language classroom as a learning tool, under the guidance of teachers who are accustomed to this form of writings and are digitally literate. A sample survey was conducted among fan fiction groups to highlight and justify the efficacy of fanfiction in promoting English language learning.

Keywords: Fanfiction, Language learning, English skills.

Introduction

Language is a unique phenomenon that created an unbridgeable gap between the human and animal world. Meaningful communication among people laid the foundation of many great civilizations. It shapes the way one thinks and channelizes a means of self-expression. It has also become a necessity to thrive in a world shrunken by technology, where communication and socializing are in paramount. Knowledge of a language other than one's native language [mother tongue] paves the way for exploration of new horizons. Demand for a common international language for exchange of ideas (oral and written), between people of divergent native languages has redoubled since the dawn of globalization,due to political and economic supremacy achieved by its native speakers, English has achieved global dominance, and proficiency in its skills have come to be regarded as a notable sign of success. English has conquered multiple domains of interest - commerce, education, media, research, tourism, Internet, and sports, Hence, familiarity and competency in the English language have become essential to survive in this global environment. English has the status of official state language in 67 nations, and the de facto official language in the US, UK, Australia, and New Zealand. It has been taught as a foreign or secondary language in many nations across the world. Learning English is a time-consuming process, and hence the general public, especially the student community is urged to have early exposure to this 'global language' so that proficiency can be attained by the time of their tertiary level of education. Developing skills in English poses numerous challenges to the non-native learners as it is an arbitrary language with complex grammatical rules, a plethora of lexis and vocabulary. Despite this onerous path, English has retained the top position as the most widely spread and learned language across the globe.

Linguists began to conduct scientific inquiries into the language acquisition mechanisms, directed to find expedient approaches to reduce language learning difficulties faced by the learners. The researches involving second language learning have gained momentum from the 20th century. It was the outcome of the changing equations in the world economy and for getting adapted to this, people realized the need to be equipped with multiple languages and began to search for ways to acquire the same. The traditionally instructed learning strategies like Grammar-Translation method and Direct method were in practice for decades. With the advent of the digital revolution, second language(L2) learning has undergone great advancements. This progression proved to be a boon for an integrated and interdependent world of the global economy, where there is a burgeoning demand for the multilinguals. The mastering of a non-native language turns out to be a facile task bolstered by the technological advances in the ensuing Information Age. The latter has been manifested by second language learning flexible digital platforms, unfettered by the traditional four walls of the classrooms.

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Digitalization has built a brand new world where, with a technical gadget and Internet access, literally everything about anything in this world would be at the tip of one's fingers. The greatest evolution in the education system was the introduction of online learning, a technically advanced version of distance education. Language learning was highly benefited by such technological developments. Top universities began to offer beginner level to advanced level certified courses on a number of languages through MOOC (Massive Open Online Courses) providers like edX, Udacity, Coursera. Web technologies have facilitated personalized websites that enable a user to learn foreign languages, even free of cost, at times. Websites like Duolingo, Busuu, Memrise are specifically designed to serve the purpose of teaching new languages, with intricate features that enhance the four language skills - speaking, writing, reading, and listening. User-friendly websites permit learners to interact with the native speakers of their target language, making it easier for the learner to gain familiarity with the language. Proper utilization of the features offered by these websites can ensure the development of the first four stages of acquisition of a second language: pre-production, early production, speech emergence and intermediate fluency. Advanced fluency and complete cognitive proficiency of the language is achieved only when the learner can generate and comprehend meaningful utterances in the target language. Constant exposure and regular practice to upgrade the skill acquired are inescapable pre-requisite. Blog-based facilities and socializing apps proved to be quite handy in this sector.

Digital platforms offer diverse opportunitiesfor education. The main attraction of the digital world is the advantage of autonomous learning and the stress-free setting that the learners are provided with. These options have a key role in the learning process. Language learning can happen in both a formal and informal setting. Formal setting refers to either programmed instruction or virtual classes by an instructor and other peers. Even though it is commonly regarded that learning under an instructor is the ideal way to learn anything, studies revealed that informal as well as self-directed learning is much better than the former way. In formal learning methods, the authority of the instructor is felt in a greater or smaller level which can abstain the learner from grasping the lessons properly. Fear is a factor that can affect learning. Psychological studies have proven that things learned under pressure and fear of teachers will not retain in the brain for a long time. Moreover, students often feel frustrated and humiliated when teachers reprimand them before their peers. It would affect their confidence level and they will remain reserved and hence will fail to achieve the true purpose of the class. Informal setting can wipe out this fear factor as it creates a supportive and interesting surrounding to assist the learning procedure. Learning happens incidentally through digital settings like social media apps, where exposure to English is unavoidable. A vast majority of second language adroitness is acquired through this incidental exposure and relaxed reading.

Fanfiction sites play a pivotal role in strengthening the creative and comprehensive ability of students, especially those trying to attain expertise in the English language. Fanfiction is an outgrowth of inspiration from a pre-existing work. It is a steadily evolving sensation which has been embraced wholeheartedly by the children and adults alike, all over the world. Even though the practice of reworking a known work to create a new workpiece dates back to centuries, it is the flourishing Internet boom that has brought Fanfiction to the zenith. FanFiction.net is one of the websites formed over the years, Archive of our own, Wattpad, LiveJournal, Tumblr etc. are other such websites. This platform became an arena for introverts and others, who wish to project themselves, express their free thoughts, and exhibit their talent without the fear of being judged. Fanfiction provides the learner with an opportunity to perfect his or her second language skills, by creation of a nurturing and relaxing environment. Hence, it is a good and powerful material for an asynchronous study of language, where there is room for individual schedule and collaboration, easing the language learning process. With Fanfiction, enhanced fluency in reading and writing can be attained; as it belongs to an area of recreational activity, learners will be motivated to engage in reading and writing thereby helping in absorbing appropriate skills.

According to Stephen Krashen's Comprehension Hypothesis, language acquisition takes place, only when one understands what people speak and what one reads. Hence, reading is the most important among the secondary language skills. Proficiency in reading will enable one to comprehend newer concepts easily. This calls for frequent acquaintance with proper reading materials. Besides, if the learning materials are of the reader's preferred interest, the reading exercises feel like a pleasurable journey. Fanfiction comes under this kind of material, a product of creativity evolved from a popular piece of work. Krashen's Affective filter hypothesis implies that the pace of acquisition of second language can be restrained by the learner's lack of motivation and self-esteem. Eagerness in language learning is indispensable for retention of the learned concepts. Unlike any dull and boring academic text, Fanfiction sets forth tempting content that can grab a reader's attention, warding off any apprehensions and stimulate the reader to read more and more. Through persistent exposure, learners get accustomed to the language and comprehend the written words. It helps in creating a positive attitude among students towards the process of reading, enhancing cognitive and affective skills as well. The whole process will

be subconscious as the learner will be unaware of his/her reading competence. Conscious improvement in reading skills also can be achieved by perusal of fanfiction. It can be a better option for the self-taught, self-learned auto didactic learner to track one's proficiency in reading any given language.

Writing in a second language cannot be learned in isolation, as writing and reading are integrated skills. Once the learner has acquired reading skills, automatically writing will be picked up. Frequent reading of fanfiction will familiarize the learner with the sentence structure, dialogue construction, grammar, spelling, and vocabulary, which are the vital factors of writing. In formal writing tasks, students will be asked to write an essay based on certain topics, where "affective filter" can supervene because writing by one's own will create a feeling of vexation at being unable to convey the thoughts and beliefs as effectively as one does in the native language. This kind of tasks cannot ensure the enhancement of affective skills and it will take a long time for the development of cognitive skills as the tasks are of little interest for the students. Reading fan fiction will inspire learners to write their content. Practicing writing through fanfiction sites and blogs will attenuate the "affective filter", stirring up the learners to express their ideas, create an optimistic attitude towards writing, and overcome writing apprehensions. It will be a creative and fun experiment for the learner to write, as stories are born out of inspiration from an already existing fiction. Hence, students, irrespective of their intellectual or creative quotient can easily indulge in the process. Through regular practice and exposure, the students would attain near-native command over the second language. Constructive criticism received through online peers is another bonus; the writer would get multiple suggestions and honest opinions about the writing, thereby developing a mindset to acknowledge the criticism and also to critically view other works. Creative- construction hypothesis suggests "that learning is not simply a question of reproducing input but a creative process that has common features regardless of the learner's language background, and that this accounts for the similarities seen in language produced by linguistically diverse second language learners"(Richards and Rodgers 26). It believes in learner's active role in the construction of meaning. It promotes student-centred learning. Fanfictions are written based on the existing context of a fictional piece, a creative activity, in which the writer restructures that context and derives new context. Learners, when provided with the task of writing fan fiction, will construct one's piece of work based on internally constructed meaning. Writing fan fiction poses no big challenge to the language learners, as they have the provision to make use of the prevailing characters and events, to bring up a new fiction of their own. This will take away the undue pressure of producing an entirely original text in English, and enable the learner to focus right on the literary practice of writing.

Fanfiction is undoubtedly a 'comprehensible input', which can be understood by a learner who already has some previous knowledge about the second language and helps the learner to grasp the language naturally than consciously. Repeated exposure to such inputs, based on familiar contexts, is anticipated to improve the language skills eventually. Only this kind of extensive inputs can aid the learner to generate 'comprehensive output', which is the effect of language acquisition.

Survey and Results

A survey was conducted among online fanfiction followers (fanfiction writers, readers, and both) in the age group (12 to 26) years, to inquire about the impact of fan fiction in improvement of language skills.A questionnaire comprised of 10 questions was distributed and around 62 responses were recorded. The inference reached from the response was that 88.7 % of the respondents find fan fiction helpful in improving their L2 skills (see fig. 1) Fan fiction serves the purpose of improvement of knowledge in language for 83.9 % of them, for 54.8%, it helps in academic excellence. As figure 2 suggests, the exposure of fan fiction helped in improving grammatical skills for 12.9 %, enhancing vocabulary and English language fluency for 38.7 % and 29 %, of them respectively. For more than half of them, fan fiction helped in improving all the three skills.
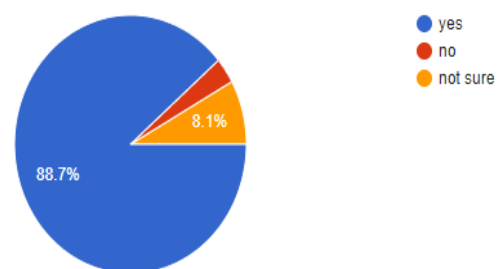
Figure 1. Does fanfiction help you in improving your secondary language skills?

Interestingly, 72.6 % encouraged using fanfiction as an academic tool to enhance the development and improvement of English skills. (see fig 3). From these positive results and favourable recommendations from the

respondents, it is obvious that apart from being a source of lay reading and writing for mere entertainment, fanfiction can also be used as a powerful strategy for advanced language learning.

An informal interview was conducted among 15 English language teachers, probing their opinion on introducing fan fiction as a learning tool in classrooms. A few were sceptical of the practice, but the majority supported it and expressed their views to give it a try, as an ingenious way for classroom education. With proper monitoring and careful administration, this strategy can be a better alternative for multiple writing exercises, commonly used in the classroom, to attain advanced fluency.

Figure 3. Which of the following has been enhanced by exposure to fanfiction?

Fanfiction can be implemented in the classroom as a language teaching strategy. It has already been launched in classrooms, but in different names and purposes - when teachers assigning activities to students in literature classes to reimagine and rewrite classical works. Language learning can be facilitated through fan fiction by adopting the method of task-based language teaching (TBLT). TBLT focuses on usage of 'tasks' as a tool to teach the second language, which is process-oriented. Activities will be provided by the teacher which demands the use of language. "In SLA research, tasks have been widely used as a vehicle to elicit language production, interaction, negotiation of meaning, processing of input and focus on forms, all of which are believed to foster second language acquisition" (Van den Branden 2006:3). It promotes student-centred and a holistic approach to learning. Learning through performing tasks would enhance student participation as it promotes fun-based education, which is enjoyable and motivating. Students are free from the constraints of language; a natural context is formulated from the student's experience with the personalized language. The language is explored based on the needs of the students. When the learners engage in tasks, active learning takes place which in turn accelerates the pace of mastering the language. TBLT

involves tasks which can foster the development of all the four language skills. These tasks help the learner to "notice the gap"(Richards and Rodgers 181) between one's utterance and that of the native speakers and hence amplifying learning process. Teacher plays the role of a monitor and motivator. TBLT can make use of technology to serve its purpose. Among the wide variety of innovative digital assisted web services, we choose fanfiction as a paragon to exhibit language acquisition at an advanced level.

Activities based on fanfiction will be beneficial for learners who have basic linguistic competence in the second language. Fanfiction, being a product of imagination and creativity, can grab the attention of the learners. If a student is given the task of reading fan fiction, he/she will encounter various kinds of lexical chunks, sentence stems and collocations. Due to the active involvement and fascination, the student subconsciously gets familiarized with these speech formulae, which helps in the production of fluent utterance as fluency relies upon more lexical means of communication. An activity of writing fan fiction based on an already existing story, the learner will have to negotiate meaning out of the story to create a fresh context, thus the learner consciously or subconsciously involves in cognitive processing of language. When these kinds of tasks are provided on a regular basis, the learners are likely to master the target language. Listening skills can be boosted up by giving the task to hear the audio format of fanfiction (podfic). The teacher can check the pronunciation of the learner by giving the task of delivering a favourite dialogue or passage from the read work. These tasks can be provided as collaborative or competitive, yielding good results either way, but the pace of acquisition will pick up if the task is collaborative, as it demands frequent interaction among the students. Tasks formulated based on fan fiction, can ensure all around improvement of the linguistic skills, as it requires the learner to use at least two skills at the same time. Assign the students to write reviews on their peer's works which will help in improving their critical thinking skills and to share the works that can serve the purpose of 'combined study'. For the same, the teachers can create a website of their own with the features enabling posting, sharing, and reviewing the works of the students and make the students aware about the same. These tasks are powerful tools for the presentation of pertinent target language samples to learners, which they will eventually modify by the
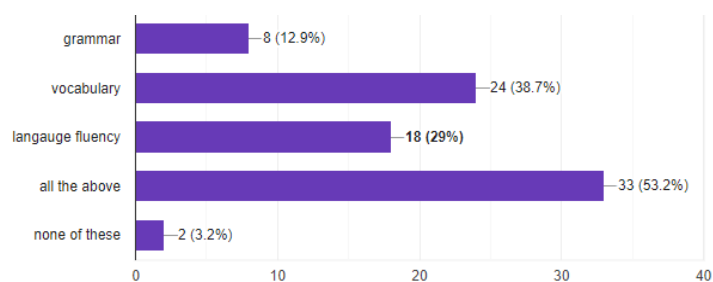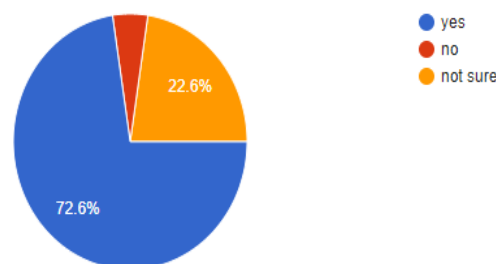
application of general cognitive processing exercises, and ultimately, for the production of 'comprehensible output', acquiring near-native fluency and proficiency in the second language.

Conclusion

The process of learning a second language is impossible with lack of a learner's motivation and interest. Fanfiction is undoubtedly an excellent medium which would transform the entire learning process as an edutainment regimen, blending education with entertainment.Language learning through fanfiction helps the students to express and comprehend their ideas, thoughts, and feelings, invigorating their personal critical and creative efficiencies. Launching this as a classroom task will accelerate the pace of language learning. Fanfiction can be an excellent technique for teaching collaborative language in classrooms, as it can promote the helpful task of peer review. It will help increase their interest in literature of the target language, boosting their enthusiasm in the journey of language acquisition. Fanfiction helps in the development of students' self-efficacy, as they are free to manipulate and exert control over their skills, unshackled from the clutches of competitive learning. where one may find incompetent in one level, which can affect the whole learning process and shatter the overall progress till that point. Reading and composing fan fiction is the working right out of the creative quotient of the mind. This triggers the factors of self-introspection and self-assessment, where a learner has an opportunity to reflect on one's competency in the language, identify the strengths and weaknesses that need improvement., By administering the process in classrooms, under the proper guidance of a teacher, will help accelerate the student's learning exercise. Constant exposure to fanfiction will help in augmenting the lexis at hand, intensifying their level of comprehension of the second language. Reading and writing fan fiction being free of constraints, deploying it in the academic realm will foster cordial student participation and yield a better out-turn in the process of learning and teaching a second language.

Appendix

Questionnaire titled" survey on impact of fanfiction in improving language skills" is included below:

1. To which age group do you belong?
   a) 12-16
   b) 17-21
   c) 22-26
2. Are you:
   a) fanfiction writer
   b) fanfiction reader
   c) both
3. How long are you exposed to fanfiction?
4. Through which medium do you access to fanfiction?
   a) Fanfiction.net
   b) Archive of our own
   c) Wattpad
   d) Others
   e) all of these
5. In which language do you prefer to read fanfiction?
   a) mother tongue
   b) English
6. Does fanfiction help you in improving your secondary language skills?
   a) Yes
   b) No
   c) Not sure
7. Which of the following has been enhanced by exposure to fanfiction?
   a) Grammar
   b) Vocabulary
   c) Language fluency
   d) All the above
   e) None of these
8. Does fanfiction reading motivated you in improving your knowledge of the language?
   a) Yes
   b) No
   c) Not sure

9. Do you think your exposure to fanfiction has helped you to excel academic language classes?
   a) Yes
   b) No
   c) Not sure
10. Do you suggest using fanfiction as an academic tool to enhance the development and improvement of English skills?
    a) Yes
    b) No
    c) Not sure

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