

“I started reading even though I didn’t understand much”:
The significance of reading and writing fanfiction in extra-
curricular language learning

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Tiivistelmä – Abstract <p>Kouluajan ulkopuolella tapahtuu oppimista jatkuvasti, erityisesti englannin kielen suhteen. Lingua francana toimivalta englannin kieleltä on lähes mahdoton välttyä, koska se on osa monen jokapäiväistä elämää esimerkiksi eri medioiden kautta. Suurin osa tästä oppimisesta tapahtuu alitajuisesti, eikä henkilö tee tietoista valintaa oppia altistuessaan kielelle tavalla tai toisella.</p> <p>Lukemisen merkitys kielen oppimisessa on laajasti tutkittu aihe (ks. esim. Krashen, 1989; Krashen and Bland, 2014). Yleinen näkemys on, että kohdekielellä lukeminen tukee kielen oppimista. Lukeminen ei kuitenkaan tyypillisesti korostu opetussuunnitelmissa muita oppimismenetelmiä enemmän. Vieraan kielen oppimisessa myös kielen käyttämistä autenttisissa tilanteissa pidetään tärkeänä. Tällaisia tilanteita on kuitenkin hankalaa luoda kouluympäristössä.</p> <p>Tämän tutkimuksen tavoite oli selvittää, kuinka paljon englanninkielisen fanifiktion lukeminen ja kirjoittaminen sekä online-faniyhteisöihin osallistuminen vaikutti englannin kielen oppimiseen. Tutkimusta varten haastateltiin neljää englannin pääaineopiskelijaa, jotka olivat olleet aktiivisia fanifiktion harrastajia yläkoulu- ja lukioiässä.</p> <p>Tutkimuksen tulokset osoittivat, että erityisesti fanifiktion lukemisella oli ollut suuri vaikutus englannin kielen oppimiseen haastateltavien omien arvioiden perusteella. Fanifiktio oli tarjonnut luetunymmärtämistä ja uutta sanastoa, ja online-yhteisöihin osallistuminen oli puolestaan opettanut informaalimpaa kieltä ja keskustelukulttuuria.</p> <p>Tutkimuksen tulokset näyttivät, että erityisesti vapaa-ajalla tapahtuvalla lukemisella oli suuri merkitys kielen oppimisessa. Tulokset korostivat myös kielenoppijoille mielekkäiden aktiviteettien kautta oppimisen. Tuloksien perusteella vapaa-ajalla tapahtuvat lukemisen merkitystä voisi korostaa kouluopetuksessa.</p>	
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1 INTRODUCTION

In contemporary society, language learning rarely happens exclusively in the classroom or via school assignments. Especially in the case of a lingua franca, such as English, language learners (ELLs) are often exposed to the language through many other ways. Through different technologies and media, such as television, the Internet and video games, ELLs can increase their language skills more or less incidentally. This can happen for example through taking part in various activities in English, such as participating in social media, creating original content, observing and reading. Language learning outside of the classroom is also one way to motivate ELLs to use language through media that are important to them.

Online fan communities are one example of the type of platform in which ELLs can improve their literacy skills through practices they are interested in. As someone who has been an active member of these communities since adolescence, I am interested to know if other people have had the same experience of increasing their L2 skills through reading and/or writing fanfiction and participating in the online communities surrounding it. Fanfiction means original works of fiction, which are written by fans of a certain piece of work, such as a TV show, movie, book, et cetera. Fanfiction authors write about existing characters, creating new environments and plots for them. There have been studies on learning L2 within fan communities and through fanfiction (e.g. Black 2005, 2009; Li, 2012), which have mainly focused on peer networks and content creating. These studies have established the significance of creating a supportive and interesting environment in order to further one's extra-curricular language learning.

However, there has been little research on how the ELLs themselves view their language learning through these mediums and how they feel it has affected their language learning and language using in formal education. Most of the previous studies have also mainly focused on writing and otherwise participating in an online community. However, although the importance of reading as a language learning method is well established (e.g. Krashen, 1989; Krashen and Bland, 2014), the significance of reading fanfiction has not been focused on. The aim of this study is to present concrete examples of increased language skills according to ELLs' own perceptions. To achieve this, I interviewed four university students majoring in English, who had been active in fanfiction communities in their early-to-mid teens.

2 INFORMAL SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

In this section, I will present forms of informal learning that are often linked with language acquisition. I will also discuss these forms from the viewpoint of online communities and finally give a brief overview of online fanfiction's role in second language acquisition.

2.1 Incidental learning

When acquiring a foreign language, especially English, much of what is learned is absorbed incidentally. As English is such a prominent part of most people's everyday life, it is almost impossible to avoid being exposed to it. According to Krashen's (1989, 2008) comprehension hypothesis, majority of language competency is acquired subconsciously and people, in general, are not aware that it has happened. Second language acquisition (SLA) is a long term process in which one can have short term goals (e.g. language test in formal education or self-directed goals like writing a short story), but the competency in the language is achieved over a longer period of time. If an individual is not learning a language that is completely foreign to them, their learning is additive, meaning that they are adding the new things that they comprehend to their prior knowledge, albeit subconsciously.

Schugurensky (2000) suggests as well that the most significant learnings in people's lives happen incidentally and the learner becomes aware of it only after the experience. In incidental learning, the individual has no prior intention to learn or they are not actively participating in certain activities in order to learn.

There are ample evidence that suggests that for example (recreational) reading and interactions with other people are crucial parts of becoming competent in a language, that usually happen incidentally (e.g. Krashen, 1989, 2008; Black, 2005, 2009). I will elaborate on these practices as means for language acquisition in sections 2.3 and 2.4. Generally, people do not engage in activities such as those with the purpose of learning something specific.

They may want to entertain themselves or form connections with other people, and language learning in this case is a secondary goal that they do not particularly aim for.

2.2 Self-directed learning

Although informal, second language acquisition can happen through self-directed practices. Schugurensky (2000) refers to these practices as something that the individual has taken upon themselves, but without the help of a formal instructor. However, an ELL can make use of someone who acts as an informal mentor of sorts, e.g. a native speaker who can give feedback on the person's language skills. In the case of self-directed learning, the intention to learn and the process itself is conscious. Nevertheless, as language acquisition is not something that happens immediately or even that noticeably, the results of this self-directed learning are better seen over time.

Self-directed learning can also happen by actively seeking a solution for a problem that a language learner can not solve themselves. As Black (2009) notes in her research of three non-native speakers' actions in an online fan community, sometimes the ELLs would post questions concerning their troubles and ask for feedback and help from people who had more advanced English skills. In this case, the learning happened immediately and is likely applicable in the future. Here the aforementioned informal learner/mentor composition is also taking place.

According to Thorne and Black (2007), as well as Black (2009), young ELLs along with other youths are now using technological tools in order to advance their literacy skills in a more global environment. The Internet, and more specifically online communities, for example, offer a great platform for self-directed learning. Black (2009) mentions how youths (in online communities) can set participation goals for themselves and thus set self-directed goals for their language learning. However, even though these goals are set and the individual is consciously working towards them, the end result might be noticeable only after a period of time or when the person is e.g. working on a school assignment or recreational writing and can detect clear advancement in their language skills.

2.3 SLA through reading

Krashen's (1989) theory of comprehensible input suggests that people acquire language through understanding messages. By reading texts that are slightly above one's skill level, it is possible to understand the message of the text holistically and eventually absorb even those parts of the text that were previously foreign to the reader. Another crucial element in language acquisition in this manner is the state of flow while reading (Krashen, 2011; Krashen and Bland, 2014). Flow, as defined by Csikszentmihalyi (1990:71), means a state in which one is so focused on a task that everything else, such as sense of time or problems outside of the task become irrelevant. Consequently, it is suggested that the material one reads should be so compelling and consuming that the reader forgets it is in another language.

As such, Krashen and Bland (2014) note that recreational reading leads the path to such competence in the language that ELLs are then able to understand texts that are not only limited to the area of their immediate interests, i.e. academic texts. By reading these texts that fall in the area of ELLs interests (e.g. fiction), they do not only acquire vocabulary and other literacy skills, but also the habit and willingness to read. Consequently, this would mean that by reading fanfiction ELLs can acquire literacy skills that are applicable to their school work.

Li (2012) as well suggests based on the results of her research about ELLs development as readers and writers that when learning a language, ELLs should be able to incorporate texts that are relevant to their interests and possibly include other elements besides just texts, e.g. comic books and graphic novels. Utilizing popular culture in language learning can give the learners a more personal approach to the English language, which will better motivate them to improve.

2.4 SLA through online interaction

It can be argued that social interaction and active participation are important aspects of second language acquisition. Li (2012:315) describes social interaction in SLA as

a dynamic social process that involves complex social relationships that learners form with others as they engage in literacy activities. These social relationships provide an individual with access to material, and informational and linguistic resources through membership in social communities.

Li (2012) also emphasizes the significance of computer mediated communication in second language acquisition. When engaging in a conversation and other social practices in a foreign language, especially when it takes place in an informal environment, such as an online message board, one is not usually actively trying to learn the language. However, participation in online communities such as message boards, chat rooms, forums etc. offers ELLs possibilities to have authentic interactions in the target language. Especially when these communities are dedicated to a specific area of interest, ELLs can get valuable exposure to the language as well as experience from people they consider their peers. According to Li (2012), peer networks have a significant effect when it comes to ELLs' learning experience.

In these environments, ELLs can usually converse with both native and non-native speakers, which both offer different opportunities to a language learner. Communicating with native speakers of a language is generally considered as a valuable experience to hone one's conversational skills. When interacting with other non-native speakers, ELLs can offer each other peer support and have a sense of community over the shared experience of using a foreign language. These, like any other genuine social interactions are harder to create as authentically in a formal education environment, in which conversations are usually more structured, directed and are working towards certain goals.

While this type of communicating might not help a language learner to systematically learn sets of grammatical rules or vocabulary, it can be argued that in order to achieve competence in a foreign language, interaction skills are just as important. According to Black (2009), through online interaction, especially in different online communities, ELLs can adapt various roles other than just a language learner, which can then in turn help them acquire the target language in more effective ways.

2.5 SLA and online fanfiction

Online fan communities are platforms in which ELLs have the opportunity to post their own works of fanfiction, as well as read other people's work, review them and generally take part in the discussion around the works of fiction. The main language used in these communities

is English, which means that in order to be able to partake, one has to have adequate English skills.

Through writing fanfiction, ELLs can utilize existing characters and environments in order to produce works of fiction. This way, providing a complete text in English becomes easier as they do not have to focus on creating an entire original piece of fiction and can focus on the writing itself as a literacy practice. Jwa (2012) notes that very few fanfiction authors on these fanfictions sites participate only through posting their works. Other aspects of being a member of an online community, such as receiving comments and responding to them, working as a pre-reader for other people's works and collaborative writing are also seen as a crucial part of language learning. It is also easier for ELLs to view, critique and discuss these pieces of fanfiction, as they are already familiar with them. In addition to these means of interaction, Black (2005) mentions the immediacy of reader response as a way for the writer to achieve a sense of audience and thus the desire to improve on their work.

Online fanfiction communities also offer a safe, familiar environment for ELLs to explore these practices. According to Black (2005), when ELLs receive constructive and positive feedback on the pieces that they post, it does not only improve their English skills but helps them further construct their identities as users of English.

Moreover, as mentioned above, leisure reading is one way to improve one's language skills. However, as there are ELL members in the online fanfiction communities whose English might not be good enough to read books in the subject matter they are interested in, due to their young age and/or lack in English education, fanfiction can offer a more familiar starting point to recreational reading and the possibility to read texts that are shorter and do not necessarily have very complex vocabulary. This might especially be the case if the fanfiction works are written by other ELLs. This way, language learners provide content for each other and as such, help one another to become more competent users of English.

3 THE PRESENT STUDY

3.1 Aim and research questions

The aim for this study is to examine the significance that reading and/or writing fanfiction and otherwise participating in the online fan community has in second language acquisition. By interviewing ELLs, I am able to compare their perceptions of their language learning through these mediums, and also find out whether or not they feel like that they were actively and purposefully acquiring a language while they were members of these communities.

The research questions I will focus on are:

1. How do ELLs feel that reading, writing and participating in the online fanfiction communities have affected their English skills?
2. Was language learning a motivational factor in engaging in fanfiction communities?

3.2 Data

The data consisted of four 10-minute interviews of individuals who were active fanfiction readers/writers and participants in the online fan community in their early-to-mid teens (13-17). I chose this age group because it is highly represented in online fan communities. Additionally, people in their teens have typically studied English for a few years and also have mandatory English courses as a part of their education at the time. Therefore, they have the skills to read and/or write fanfiction in English. The interviews were conducted in September 2017. I chose interviews as my data collection method, because according to Dufva (2011: 132-133), when studying people's own perceptions, this is the ideal method. The interviews consisted of semi-structured questions to ensure that I am able to gather the data my study requires, but also leave room to the participants' own stories and examples on the topic. The participants of my study were all English majors, selected by an email enquiry sent to a mailing list for English students. This was preferable in the case of my study, as they might have a more analytical grasp on language and their own language skills. The students

who contacted me through this enquiry were all female. The four interviewees are introduced in Table 1.

Table 1. The participants

	Age	Gender	Stage of studies
Student 1	19	Female	1st year student
Student 2	24	Female	5th year student
Student 3	26	Female	7th year student
Student 4	24	Female	7th year student

The interviews were in Finnish, as I assumed it would be easier for the participants to answer in Finnish, and I would get longer responses to the open questions. The interviews were also recorded, and then transcribed and translated in English. A pilot interview was conducted in order to make sure that the questions were suitable and they were afterwards discussed with the participant in the interest of getting their opinions and perceptions concerning the questions. The results of the pilot interview will not be included in the analysis. The interview questions can be found both in Finnish and English in the Appendices.

3.3 Methods of analysis

As the data of this study consists of interviews, the method used to analyse the collected data was content analysis. With content analysis, it is possible to categorize the data thematically, by finding for example similarities, differences, frequently appearing topics or absences (Dufva, 2011: 139). After categorizing, it is easier to find answers to my research questions. As I am interested in the participants' own perceptions and personal stories, and the interviews are only partially structured, content analysis seems to be the best option for the analysis. According to Krippendorff (2013: 23), when closely analysing and interpreting relatively small amounts of text, qualitative content analysis works well.

4 FANFICTION AS A LANGUAGE LEARNING METHOD

The purpose of this study was to find out to what extent English majors credit fanfiction in their language learning and acquisition during their early-to-mid teens. The findings are categorized thematically, according to my interview questions and the four most relevant topics: reading, motivation, comparison to formal education, and online communities. These topics came up most frequently in the interviews. The examples are translated to English and the original Finnish transcription is also provided.

4.1. SLA through reading fanfiction

4.1.1 Progress of L2 competence through reading

All of the study participants started to read fanfiction around the age of 14 to 15 and had varying English skills up to that point. They all felt strongly that particularly reading fanfiction had increased their English skills, when considering it as a separate practice from formal education. Students 2 and 4 said that they felt that the real language learning occurred outside of formal education, in this case, through reading fanfiction. Improvement was not just self-observed but also visible in grades. Student 1, who had started reading fanfiction at the age of 14, and had struggled with English in elementary school also commented on this (see Example 1).

Example 1: They [grades] increased all the time, at the beginning of junior high school my grades were maybe, they had gone up to around 7¹ or something, but then at the end of junior high school they were pretty much 9 or 10.

Et siinä ne [arvosanat] kasvo koko ajan ja se, että mul sitte varmaan oli yläasteen alussa numerot, oli sitä ehkä, ne oli noussu jonnekin seiskan tasolle tai jotain, mut sit yläasteen loppupuolella niin ne oli sitten tota sitä ysiä, kymppiä aikalailla.

All of the participants had begun reading English fanfiction in junior high school, at a point in their education when they had already studied English for a few years, and there were still few years of mandatory English studies ahead of them. Students 2 and 4 said that their English skills were already fairly good at that point, and there were mostly individual words

¹ In Finnish comprehensive school, performance is evaluated on a scale of 4(failing grade) to 10.

they did not understand and sometimes used dictionaries to check the words and other times just kept on reading, passing over any unknown words unless they kept coming up repeatedly. As mentioned above, Student 1 struggled with English at the beginning of junior high school, but after she began to read fanfiction, her language skills and especially reading comprehensions increased significantly. Student 3 said she understood basic themes in the stories, but actions and nuances such as tones of voice were harder to comprehend. Nevertheless, she kept reading and also using a dictionary to check unknown words, sometimes several times. These findings support Krashen's (1989) theory of acquiring language by reading texts slightly above one's skill level.

4.1.2 Possible applications to formal language teaching

It can be argued that these results of increased L2 skills through reading fanfiction could be generalized to all recreational reading. There is ample evidence that supports the findings of this study by suggesting that reading increases language skills. Krashen, especially, has credited reading as a language-learning tool (e.g. Krashen, 1989; Krashen and Bland, 2014). A pattern of wanting to read more and more stories about one's favorite characters in different settings was apparent in the answers of all of the study participants. Additionally, all of the four interviewees said they had more or less stumbled upon fanfiction while trying to find more information about their fandoms. Upon realizing how vast source of stories fanfiction was, they were highly motivated to understand the content and read on, as Student 3 explains in Example 2:

Example 2: I was such a big fan, so I started reading even though I was maybe, like 14-years-old so I didn't understand much then with my English skills, but I wanted to read more stories about these nice characters, so I continued.

Niin kova fani kun olin, niin rupesin sitten niitä lukemaan vaikka olisinkohan mä ehkä ollu niinku joku 14-vuotias, nii en mä sillä mun englannin kielen taidolla hirveesti sillon ymmärtäny, mutta mä halusin lukea lisää tarinoita näistä kivoista hahmoista niin sitten mä jatkoin.

It can be concluded from these results, that recreational reading should possibly be encouraged more in formal language teaching. However, as these study participants were most likely avid readers already, or at least liked reading, this might not be as good a motivation to those students who do not enjoy recreational reading. Nevertheless, fanfiction could offer a solution to this, if these students have, for example, a favorite character from a movie or a TV show, they might enjoy reading about those characters.

4.2. Motivation for reading English fanfiction

The participants had read fanfiction mainly in English. All of them said that they had maybe once or twice read Finnish fanfiction works, but it had been mostly around the time that they originally started reading fanfiction. Nevertheless, Student 3 said that although she read in English, she had mainly written in Finnish, as she was mostly sharing her works with a group of friends and not publishing them on any online fanfiction platforms. The main reason for reading English works was that vast majority of the fanfiction content in their chosen fandoms² (and all fandoms in general) was in English. Students 2 and 4 also mentioned that the quality of Finnish fanfiction is unfortunately not particularly good. This could be explained by assuming that people who write fanfiction in Finnish are possibly relatively young, and as such do not have adequate language skills to write in English and/or are consequently new, inexperienced writers.

English being the main language of fanfiction and the reported poor quality of Finnish works also worked as a motivation to read in English: it was basically the only option. Based on the interviews, it can be claimed that learning the language was not the main motivation, at the most it had instrumental value. It was something that one needed to learn to be able to read all the stories they wanted:

Example 3: Not like actively that otherwise I wouldn't have read, but I'm learning so well [by reading], it wasn't like that, the entertainment value was the most important thing, but that you learned came as a bonus.

Ei niinku sillee aktiivisesti, että niinkun että muuten en välttämättä lukisi, mutta kun minä niin hyvin opin [lukemalla], ei se nyt silleenkään, se oli niinku se viihdearvo pääasia, mutta sitten se tuli niinku bonuksena se, että oppi.

As mentioned earlier in Section 2, language learning mostly happens subconsciously, especially in the case of lingua franca, recreational reading might rarely be seen as a conscious learning method, as English is so commonly in use. Conscious learning could possibly also contradict with the state of flow (Csikszentmihalyi 1990) while reading, as it is probable that if one is deliberately trying to study language by reading, they are too focused on the different aspects of the text, e.g. vocabulary, to be able to enter a state of flow.

² Fan domain. The state of being a fan of something or the collective group/subculture of fans of a specific common interest.

Another explanation for preferring English fanfiction over Finnish is that in many cases the original content the fanfiction is based on is in English. In these cases, the fandom has already established a certain vocabulary around the topic of interest, which might contain, for example, English phrases or inside-jokes that have been integrated in the fandom and do not translate very well.

Additionally, if fanfiction writers and other content creators choose to work with a language other than English, e.g. their native language, they do not reach international audience. This, in turn, decreases the possibilities to get comments and reviews on one's work and prevents them from having discussions about the work with others in the fandom, if they do not speak that language. Consequently, it also decreases the amount English interactions that the creator could have with other members of the community.

4.3 Comparison to formal education

Although the participants said that reading had a significantly bigger role in their fanfiction experience than writing, they mostly credited their writing skills to fanfiction as well, as they did not recall having many writing assignments in formal education. Mostly the assignments had specific themes, such as letter to the editor or a book review and there was essentially no creative writing.

The participants felt like they had acquired such strong language skills, at least partly through reading and writing fanfiction, that school assignments felt overtly easy. Student 3 said that reading through the whole English textbook in advance was no trouble at all, on top of which she did not have to study for vocabulary tests anymore after she began reading fanfiction. It would appear that the students were not challenged in English classes anymore towards the end of their comprehensive school, as can be interpreted from Student 4's example of completing assignments during class:

Example 4: I was quite advanced in English in junior high school, so mostly I just did the assignments and then the teacher just gave me an English Donald Duck comic and said well go ahead and read that then, when the others do these assignments for half an hour which took you five minutes.

Mä olin yläasteella aika sillee ryhmää edellä enkussa, että enimmäkseen vaan tein tehtävät ja sitte opettaja anto vaan jonkun Aku Ankan englanninkielisenä, että no lue tota nyt sitte ku muut tekee vielä puol tuntia näitä tehtäviä mihin sulla meni viis minuuttia.

Although Krashen (2008) has also suggested that through reading one can also acquire grammar and spelling competence, it could be argued that formal education offered structure and the basic building blocks to the more advanced language skills acquired through recreational (fanfiction) reading.

Interestingly, when asking what kind of skills acquired through fanfiction they could apply to their school work, two of the four students said it was mostly vocabulary, and reading comprehension. However, all of them said that reading fanfiction had greatly improved their language skills. From these results it can be interpreted that the skills the participants felt they had acquired were, for the most part, not applicable in formal education. These could mean, for example, creative writing skills, topic-specific vocabulary and conversation and social skills, which will be discussed further in the next section.

4.4 SLA and online fanfiction communities

In addition to reading and writing, participating in one or several online communities is typical for a person interested in fanfiction. This might occur through different means such as commenting on other people's works, proofreading, participating in conversations related to the common topic of interest (fandom) or conversing about other topics in an online platform dedicated to the fan community of particular topic.

The participants in this study said they acted more as observers in these online communities, rarely taking part in discussions. All of them also said that they had given feedback on and reviewed other people's works. However, these means of participating do not necessarily require a response or any kind of back-and-forth. Student 3 described herself as an observer:

Example 5: I'd rather be, like, in the background and follow the conversation ... But when I was younger there were the forums of course, and I sometimes went there to look, or like read what people were talking about ... I just, like, read other people's thoughts there.

Mä oon mielummin siinä niinku taustalla ja seuraan mieluummin sitä keskustelua ... Mut sillon nuorempana tietenki sitte siellä on myös ne foorumit, sit mä välillä kävin siellä kattomassa, tai niinku lueskelemassa, et mitä ihmiset siellä oikeen keskusteli ... mä vaan niinku luin muiden ajatuksia siellä.

Nonetheless, the participants emphasized that from this aspect of fanfiction communities they learned informal language use and conversational culture. These were learned, for instance, by following discussions about controversial and contemporary issues such as abortion and

religion and also through having conversations and inside-jokes about the fandom among a smaller group of friends within the community.

Students 1 and 2 said that talking with other people in the online communities gave them authentic conversation experience, during which one does not necessarily focus on grammatical correctness:

Example 6: You conversed more in English via [online communities], so it like, came easier... you have to compose text faster. (Student 1)

Enemmän sitten just keskusteli englanniksi [online-yhteisöjen] kautta, niin tota sit se niinkun tuli vielä helpommin se ... pitää niinku nopeemmin muodostaa sitä tekstiä. (Student 1)

Example 7: [One] learned a lot ... the kind of fluent English, because there were both native writers and non-natives, so you learned to notice how native writers write, and learn somehow the kind of, so called real English. (Student 2)

Oppi ihan hirveesti ... sellasta sujuvaa englantia, että jotenki kun oli sekä natiiveja kirjoittajia että epänatiiveja, niin sitte oppi jotenki huomaamaan, että mitenkä niinku natiivit kirjottajat kirjottaa, että oppi jotenki sitä sellasta ns. niinku aitoa enkkua. (Student 2)

These results support Li's (2012) findings, which suggest that online communities also offer opportunities for social learning. It could also be argued that having authentic conversations with native as well as non-native English speakers is an important practice, which could further prepare ELLs for real life interactions. However, it is difficult to recreate authentic, informal conversation situations in a classroom environment, as there is always at least the aspect of observing and possibly evaluating the speakers. This kind of situation might make the ELL more nervous about using language, while in the online community within their area of interest, they are more in charge of their own language use and can further construct their own language identity.

4.5 Conclusion of the findings

Whereas some of the participants had had relatively good English skills when discovering fanfiction, others had struggled with their English studies. However, all of them felt that reading in particular increased their language skills. Writing and participating in online fanfiction communities were also credited, albeit not as much. All four of the interviewees also said that after their language skills improved through fanfiction, English studies at school became much more easier for them. Different fanfiction-related activities gave different skills; while reading and writing improved reading comprehension and vocabulary, observing and taking part in online communities improved communication skills and knowledge of

conversation culture. In addition, all participants were highly motivated to read fanfiction in English, as there were not much content to be found in Finnish, and they felt the Finnish works were of substandard quality.

5 CONCLUSION

This study was specifically interested in the participants' own perceptions of their language skills. The first research question of this study was: "How do ELLs feel that reading, writing and participating in the online fanfiction communities have affected their English Skills?" The results showed that all of the participants felt that writing and especially reading fanfiction in English increased their language skills significantly. The second research question was: "Was language learning a motivational factor in engaging in fanfiction communities?" According to the results, the interviewees were not actively or consciously trying to learn while engaging in fanfiction and online fandom communities, but rather their skills improved gradually over time and subconsciously, as previous research has shown is often the case with language learning. The participants also felt that although they mostly learnt grammar and structure via formal instruction in a classroom environment, skills such as applying this knowledge by writing, reading comprehension, vocabulary and informal English were mostly gained through fanfiction and the community surrounding it.

These results might be relevant to language teachers, who are looking for new inspiration to their teaching practices. The relevance of recreational reading could this way be emphasized in a classroom environment and possibly even fanfiction as a concept could be introduced. As previously mentioned, students who otherwise are not avid readers or writers, especially in a foreign language, might find reading and/or writing about a favorite character easier. It could also be interpreted from these results that people generally learn languages better through activities that are important to them. However, all of these activities might be difficult to apply in formal education.

The strength of my study was to interview ELLs directly and asking about their own experience, rather than analyzing and interpreting existing data on fanfiction sites, as many previous studies have done. There have also not been studies specifically about Finnish students' language learning experience in this context, so it can be argued that the results of

this study are more applicable to Finnish language teaching than the results about L2 students of other countries.

Further research could include a bigger, more diverse group of participants for the study. As this study included only four people, all of whom were female and English majors, a wider sampling might help to produce results that are more valid. Participants' own suggestions as to how they would apply fanfiction in their language learning in formal education could also be included.

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Appendix 1

Interview questions in Finnish

1. Mikä sai sinut aloittamaan fanfictionin lukemisen/kirjoittamisen?
2. Kuinka vanha olit, kun aloit lukemaan/kirjoittamaan fanfictionia?
3. Luetko vai kirjoitatko enemmän?
 - a. Englanniksi vai suomeksi? Miksi?
4. Missä vaiheessa aloit lukea/kirjoittaa englanninkielistä fanfictionia/ miksi et lukenut/kirjoittanut suomenkielistä fanfictionia?
5. Kun aloitit lukemaan/kirjoittamaan englanniksi, oliko se aluksi vaikeaa? Mikä auttoi prosessissa?
6. Tuntuiko, että lukeminen/kirjoittaminen englanniksi paransi kielitaitoasi (kouluopetuksesta erillisesti)?
 - a. Millaisia taitoja koet, että sait?
 - b. Pystyitkö hyödyntämään näitä taitoja koulutyössäsi?
7. Oliko kielen oppiminen motivaationa fanfictionia lukiessa/kirjoittaessa?
8. Oletko ollut osallisena fanfictioniin liittyvissä online-yhteisöissä? Miten?
9. Koitko, että sait erilaista kielitaitoa näissä yhteisöissä? Millaista?
 - a. Oliko näistä yhteisöistä saamasi kielitaito mielestäsi merkittävämpää kuin lukiessa/kirjoittaessa kartutettu kielitaito?

Appendix 2

Interview questions in English

1. What made you start reading/writing fanfiction?
2. How old were you when you started reading/writing fanfiction?
3. Do you read or write more?
 - a. In Finnish or in English? Why?
4. At what point did you start reading/writing fanfiction in English/ why you did not read/write fanfiction in Finnish?
5. When you started reading/writing in English, was it hard at first? What helped you in the process?
6. Did you feel that reading/writing fanfiction in English improved your language skills (as a separate practice from formal education)?
 - a. What kind of skills do you feel you gained?
 - b. Were you able to utilize these skills in school work?
7. Was language learning a motivation when you read/wrote fanfiction?
8. Did you participate in the online fanfiction communities? How?
9. Do you feel you gained different kind of language skills from these communities?
What kind?
 - a. Do you feel these skills were more significant to you than the skills you acquired by reading/writing?