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FACULTAT DE CIÈNCIES DE L'EDUCACIÓ

**OFFICIAL MASTER'S DEGREE IN TEACHING IN SECONDARY
SCHOOLS,
VOCATIONAL TRAINING AND LANGUAGE CENTRES**

MASTER'S DISSERTATION

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**Belonging in English: Fandoms, Imagined
Communities, and EFL Learners'
Investments**

AUTHOR

LAIA PONTONES OLIVERA

TUTOR

BERTA TORRAS VILA

*It is good to have an end to journey towards; but it is the journey that matters, in the
end.*

The Left Hand of Darkness (Ursula K. Le Guin, 1969)

Acknowledgments

To my mom, the first teacher, mentor, and role figure I had. The one who showed me what it means to be a teacher. The one who spent the summer break preparing the classroom for the next year. Because it must mean something when, at the beginning of the master's year, a professor asks: "Who here has a parent who is a teacher?" and at least half of the class raises their hand. Thank you, this is for you.

To my dad, who showed me that being a fan of something is a quality we must be proud of, because not everyone can say it. To bookshelves filled with books thanks to my parents, and to new bookshelves filled by my sister and me.

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Finally, I would like to thank the stories, characters, songs, and so much more that sparked my curiosity and creativity. What began as personal interests became a source of motivation, community, and inspiration that accompanied me throughout this work. To many more years as a fan!

Abstract

English

This master's dissertation explores how participation in English-mediated fandoms influences students' perceptions and investment in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in compulsory secondary education (ESO). The theoretical framework includes concepts such as imagined communities, communities of practice, fandom, and Online Informal Learning of English (OILE).

It was hypothesised that students involved in English-mediated fandoms would demonstrate higher levels of reading and oral comprehension and report greater motivation and investment in English than their non-participating peers.

The research was conducted with 61 students from a 2nd ESO class in a public secondary school and adopted a mixed-methods approach with a qualitative perspective. Data was collected through questionnaires, reading comprehension tasks, field notes, and a focus group interview.

The findings suggest that students who participate in English-mediated fandoms are exposed to a wide range of authentic English input and demonstrate higher levels of reading and oral comprehension, as well as greater motivation and engagement in EFL learning. This dissertation highlights the educational value of students' informal digital practices and argues that fandom communities can provide meaningful opportunities for language learning, identity development, and investment in English beyond the school context.

Key words: imagined communities, communities of practice, fandom, fan communities, investment, English as a Foreign Language (EFL), Online Informal Learning of English (OILE)

Abstract

Català

Aquest treball de fi de màster explora com la participació en fandoms on l'anglès fa de *lingua franca* influeix en les percepcions dels estudiants i en la seva inversió en l'anglès com a llengua estrangera (EFL) a l'Educació Secundària Obligatòria (ESO). El marc teòric inclou conceptes com les comunitats imaginades, les comunitats de pràctica, els fandoms i l'Aprenentatge Informal de l'Anglès en Línia (Online Informal Learning of English, OILE).

Es va plantejar la hipòtesi que els estudiants implicats en fandoms de llengua anglesa mostrarien nivells més elevats de comprensió oral i lectora, així com una major motivació i inversió en l'aprenentatge de l'anglès, que els seus companys que no hi participen.

La recerca es va dur a terme amb 61 estudiants de 2n d'ESO d'un centre públic d'educació secundària i un enfocament de mètodes mixtos amb una perspectiva qualitativa. Les dades es van recollir mitjançant qüestionaris, activitats de comprensió lectora, notes de camp i una entrevista de grup focal.

Els resultats suggereixen que els estudiants que participen en fandoms mediat per l'anglès estan exposats a una àmplia varietat d'*input* autèntic en anglès i mostren nivells més elevats de comprensió oral i lectora, així com una major motivació i implicació en l'aprenentatge de l'EFL. Aquest treball destaca el valor educatiu de les pràctiques digitals informals dels estudiants i sosté que les comunitats fandom poden oferir oportunitats significatives per a l'aprenentatge de llengües, el desenvolupament de la identitat i la inversió en l'anglès més enllà del context escolar.

Paraules clau: comunitats imaginades, comunitats de pràctica, fandom, comunitats de fans, inversió, anglès com a llengua estrangera (EFL), aprenentatge informal de l'anglès en línia (OILE).

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1. Introduction

1.1.Motivation

Ever since I was young, I have always been an avid reader. Books were a constant presence throughout my childhood, and, as my parents always say, you could not find me without a book. As I grew older, I discovered there were communities, called fandoms, where I could share my passion for a specific book series or my favourite characters.

What began with books soon grew into an interest in many different fandoms. Whether it was literary fandoms, anime or manga fandoms, or music fandoms, particularly those related to K-pop, I was there. I found myself wanting to know more about how other people perceived my favourite stories and characters, and the fandom spaces were the perfect place to do that. However, as a Catalan speaker, I soon realised that much of the content I wanted to access was only available in English. Fanfiction, interviews, social media posts, fan forums, and even official content were often produced first and foremost in English. Even if the content was eventually translated into Spanish, it was usually published several days after the original upload. As a result, the translation was often no longer relevant, since new posts, content, or stories had already been published in the meantime.

Rather than seeing this as an obstacle, I saw it as a motivation. I wanted to understand what other fans were saying, read stories that had not been translated, follow conversations as they happened, and so on. As a result, English stopped being just another school subject and became a tool that allowed me to participate in the things I loved. It exposed me to authentic uses of English and helped with my vocabulary and grammar acquisition, reading and oral comprehension, and with my confidence when using the language. Not only did this shape my postgraduate studies, but also my bachelor's degree, as I studied Translation and Interpreting, with English as one of my languages.

Ultimately, this dissertation represents the intersection of two lifelong interests: my passion for fandom culture and my journey as an English learner. It is an opportunity to explore academically a phenomenon that has profoundly shaped both my relationship with the language and the path that led me to study it.

1.2.Objectives and Research Questions

The general objective of the dissertation is to investigate how participation in English-mediated *fandoms* influences students' perception and engagement with English as a Foreign Language. Nonetheless, the objectives of this dissertation include:

1. To identify the extent and nature of students' participation in *fandoms* where English is used as the main language.
2. To examine whether engagement in English-mediated *fandoms* is associated with higher levels of reading and oral comprehension in English.
3. To explore students' attitudes towards English as a subject in relation to their *fandom* involvement.
4. To analyse how *fandom participation* affects students' motivation, behaviour, engagement and participation in English formal learning lessons at school.
5. To investigate differences in perceptions of English between students engaged in fandom activities and students with no involvement in fandoms.

In order to address the objectives outlined above, this study is guided by the general research question of how participation in English-mediated fandoms influences students' perception and investment in English as a Foreign Language and the following specific research questions:

RQ1. To what extent do 2nd ESO students participate in *fandoms* where English is the main language of communication?

RQ2. What types of English input, such as posts, subtitles, lyrics, fanfiction and so on, do students encounter through their *fandom interactions*?

RQ3. Do students who participate in English-mediated *fandoms* demonstrate higher levels of reading comprehension than students who do not?

RQ4. Do students who participate in English-mediated *fandoms* demonstrate higher levels of oral comprehension than students who do not?

RQ5. How do students involved in English-mediated *fandoms* perceive the relationship between their informal English learning through fandoms and formal learning at school?

RQ6. How does being part of a *fandom* influence students' motivation, participation and engagement during English lessons?

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Imagined Communities and EFL

“Imagined communities”, as coined by Anderson (1991), refer to groups of people that connect through the power of imagination. Furthermore, Anderson adds that nations are imagined communities, “because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (1991, p. 6). As such, it describes communities whose members share a sense of belonging despite never meeting most of the other members. Although Anderson originally developed the concept to explain nationalism, the notion has subsequently been applied to language learning contexts in order to understand how learners imagine themselves as members of social groups that extend beyond their immediate surroundings.

Moreover, Kanno and Norton (2003) suggest the notion that imagined communities may have a greater influence on learners' present actions and engagement than those which they interact with daily and are considered real. From this perspective, students are not only influenced by their present social environments but also by the communities they aspire to join in the future. To illustrate this argument, two examples are introduced in which Norton and Kanno research how different subjects react and engage with ESL (English as a Second Language) in relation to their own imagined community. The abovementioned examples are titled: "Katarina and her imagined professional community" by Norton (2000, 2001) and "Rui and his imagined, idealized Japan" by Kanno (2000, 2003). On the one hand, Katarina decides to not participate in the class due to an incoherence between her imagined community, where she has "legitimate claim to professional status" (Norton, 2003), and the educational vision of the ESL teacher. On the other hand, Rui's imagined community provides him with the direction needed to study his mother tongue as a bilingual student. These examples demonstrate the fact that imagined communities can significantly shape learners' investment, participation, and language-learning trajectories.

The relationship between imagined communities and language learning is closely connected to the concept of "investment". Norton (2013) argues that learners' engagement with a language cannot be explained solely through "motivation", as language learning is also shaped by learners' identities and future aspirations. According to Norton (2013), "if learners 'invest' in language and literacy, they do so with the understanding that they will attain a wider range of symbolic and material resources" (2013, p.2). In this sense, learners may invest in English because the language provides access to communities and identities that they value. Kanno and Norton (2003) further argue that imagined communities influence learners' investment by connecting language learning to desired future affiliations. In digital contexts, participation in online communities can reinforce this process.

Previous research has also highlighted the role of online environments in identity construction. In her study of a Chinese immigrant adolescent, Lam (2000) found that online communication enables the learner to develop new social relationships and alternative identities through the use of English. Although the study was conducted in an ESL context, its findings are relevant to the EFL field, as students may have limited opportunities to use English in their local environments. Therefore, digital spaces can function as sites where learners engage with English meaningfully while simultaneously developing a sense of belonging to a broader community.

Through participation in fan communities, learners may imagine themselves as members of global groups united by shared interests, values, and practices. As these communities often use English as *lingua franca*, the language becomes not only an academic subject but also a means of belonging, participation, and identity expression. Several authors, such as Pavlenko and Norton (2007) acknowledge that not considering the imagined communities of the students, might influence their learning experience negatively. As a result, they advocate for their inclusion in classroom practice.

2.2. Communities of Practice

Imagined communities provide individuals with a sense of belonging and an identity. Nevertheless, they often materialise as various “communities of practice”, a concept introduced by Wenger (1998), who defined them as “groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly”. In addition, the development of these communities happens around topics that matter to people, and the participation of the members may be in different ways and degrees. Nonetheless, someone is considered a member of the community on the condition that they contribute to the practice, because learning can be understood as a social process that emerges through participation in

shared activities and engagement with other members of the community (Lave & Wenger E., 1991).

According to B. Wenger-Trayner and E. Wenger-Trayner (2015), communities of practice are formed through the process of collective learning within a shared domain of human endeavour. They argue that there are three dimensions which are essential for a community of practice to exist: a domain, a community, and a practice.

Domain: the shared area of interest that gives the group its identity and purpose. Membership implies a degree of commitment to this common interest and the development of a shared competence. This competence may not be recognised as an ‘expertise’ outside the community of practice, but it is inside the community.

Community: the relationships established among the members through interaction, discussion, and mutual support. It is through these social connections that learning becomes possible.

Practice: encompasses the shared knowledge, resources, experiences, and ways of doing things that members develop and maintain collectively over time. A community of practice is not a ‘community of interest’, meaning that the members are ‘practitioners’, as they use the knowledge shared with each other in their practice.

Only the combination of the three elements creates a community of practice, and with these three dimensions, a community of practice can be distinguished from simple networks, social groups, or online forums.

Furthermore, with the development of global communications and social media, it is likely that imagined communities extend beyond what the previous ones did. Therefore, users can interact with people around the world, share an imagined community and, thereafter, create a community of practice. According to Kanno and Norton (2003), “humans are capable of

connecting with communities that lie beyond the local and immediate and that investment in such imagined communities strongly influence identity construction and engagement in learning” (247 – 248).

The landscape of second language acquisition (SLA) appears to have been altered by two concurrent global phenomena: the consolidation of English as *lingua franca* and the integration of technologies in the learners’ daily lives. For today’s adolescents, the learning of English as a Foreign Language in secondary education is shaped not only by classroom instruction and interaction, but also by students’ exposure to the language beyond the formal boundaries of the school. Within the technologized ecology of nowadays, fandoms or fan-communities, which have existed as long as films and bands, even if they were not labelled as such, have grown significantly. It is in these contexts in which adolescents can engage regularly with English, not as a subject at school, but as a way of being part of a community. Sometimes, being the only way to communicate with others who resonate with them and their favourite topics.

This theoretical framework aims to connect terms such as “imagined communities” (Anderson, 1991) “communities of practice” (Wenger, 1998) with the EFL classroom and the concept of “fandom”.

2.3.The Concept of ‘Fandom’

Fandom or fan community is a term that has been used for a long time. Nevertheless, it is possible that only those who state they are part of one know the meaning and what it describes.

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the term *fandom* originates in the United States of America, and it is composed by the noun *fan*, which is an abbreviation of *fanatic*, and the suffix *-dom*, which in Old English was used to refer to statue, judgement, jurisdiction.

Nowadays, the suffix -dom is employed with the figurative sense of ‘domain, realm’ such as in the following nouns: kingdom, dukedom, freedom, and so on.

Some of the definitions in English are the following:

Fandom (*Oxford English Dictionary*)

[fan n.² + -dom suffix] / orig. U.S.

The world of enthusiasts for some amusement or for some artist; also in extended use.

Fandom (*Cambridge Dictionary*)

noun

[Uncountable or singular noun, a noun that has no plural]: the state of being a fan of someone or something, especially a very enthusiastic one.

[Countable noun: a noun that has a plural]: a group of fans of someone or something, especially very enthusiastic ones.

Fandom (*Merriam-Webster*)

Noun / Fan·dom

1. All the fans (as of a sport)
2. The state or attitude of being a fan

There has been a number of studies with the fandom phenomenon as part of their theoretical framework, and various definitions of the terms have been published; however, Henry Jenkins differentiated between the concept of *fan* and *being part of a fandom*, which is crucial for this dissertation. Because someone who is only a fan may not be part of the “fandom imagined community” and may not engage in the community of practice. Henry Jenkins (2018) states the following in “Fandom, Negotiation, and Participatory Culture”:

In everyday speech, the word fans has a broad meaning, used loosely to describe anyone who forms an intense affective bond with a particular property, whether or not they share those feelings with anyone else. Sometimes, being a fan means nothing more than pressing a “like” button on some Facebook page. Fandom, on the other hand, refers to those who claim a common identity and a shared culture with other fans. News representations often define these fans in relation to singular texts (for example, “Trekkies,” or the preferred “Trekkers” in the case of Star Trek), but, in fact, a fandom is better understood as a more expansive subculture, whose members engage with a broad array of different media objects but who share traditions and practices built up over many years. (p. 16)

Every fan community has its rules and culture. Furthermore, a fandom is not a consumer culture, which is based on the consumption of goods and services. Instead, it would be described as a participatory culture, a term coined and refined by Jenkins et al. (2009), which has the following aspects:

1. Relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement.
2. Strong support for creating and sharing creations with others.
3. Some type of informal membership whereby what is known by the most experience is passed along to novices.
4. Members who believe that their contributions matter.
5. Members who feel some degree of social connection with one another (at least, they care what other people think about what they have created).

The members have no compulsory obligation to create content for the community, but they must be free to contribute to it if they desire. In fandoms, these expressions Jenkins refers to are normally fan fiction, a type of stories written by fans for fans about certain

fictional characters or universe that has been published as any type of media, fan art, which are drawings of characters, fan videos, that are edited clips of series or movies, and so on.

In conclusion, as the members of a fandom create and interact with this content, they can feel part of a community and a sense of identity.

2.4.The Concept of Fandom and Its Role in English as a Foreign Language Learning (EFL)

Educational systems promote formal learning, which, according to the CEDEFOP ¹, is the “acquisition of knowledge, values, skills, and competences in an organised and structured environment” such as a school. Formal learning normally leads to a type of certification proving that the student has achieved the learning outcomes. Connected to the formal settings but only with some form of learning support present for instance, a relationship between student and teacher, is non-formal learning. A framework of theory and planned activities still stands, although it may not lead to certification. In contrast, informal learning is the term for the acquisition of knowledge, values and competences which happens during daily activities, which are not designed as learning activities and do not have any type of learning support. Regarding the aforementioned concept of informal learning, it could be exemplified by the sentence “learning by osmosis”, which describes “the process by which ideas and information are absorbed without conscious effort” as defined by the Cambridge Dictionary.

In recent years, the widespread of digital technologies has significantly expanded opportunities for informal learning. Young learners are highly familiar with digital environments and frequently use platforms such as X, formerly known as Twitter, Instagram, TikTok, and other social media networks as part of their everyday communication and

¹ European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training: List of Terminology of European education and training policy.

entertainment practices. Within these contexts, learners may engage in Online Informal Learning of English (OILE), which Sockett (2014) defines as the incidental acquisition of EFL through online activities carried out primarily for leisure, entertainment, or communication rather than the explicit intention of language learning. As a result, exposure to English occurs naturally as learners interact with online content in their daily lives.

Through these activities, learners may develop different language skills. For example, reading fanfiction, news about their favourite artists, or social media posts can contribute to reading comprehension and vocabulary acquisition, while watching interviews, livestreams, video reviews, or listening to podcasts and music may foster listening comprehension.

An essential characteristic of fandom participation is the level of engagement it generates among its members, as they will frequently seek information, consume content, and interact with other fans because these activities are connected to their personal interests and identities. As a result, engagement with English can be understood not only as a matter of language learning but also as a form of investment, because learners perceive the language as a means of accessing valued content, participating in meaningful interactions, and becoming members of communities that are important to them (Norton, 2013). This constant investment may increase learners' exposure to English and create additional opportunities for language development.

However, fandom participation extends beyond the passive consumption of content, because, as it has been mentioned before, it is a participatory culture, not a consumer one. Online fan spaces provide opportunities for interaction and communication among individuals who share similar interests, regardless of their geographic location. Through comments, fan forums, and fan-generated content, fans actively engage with one another using English as a means of communication. Consequently, learners are not only exposed to authentic language

input but also encouraged to use the language for meaningful purposes, such as expressing opinions, exchanging information, and participating in discussions in fan forums.

Therefore, fandoms can be regarded as valuable environments for Online Informal Learning of English. By combining authentic linguistic input with opportunities for interaction and participation, they create spaces in which learners engage with English in a natural, meaningful, and interest-driven manner. Beyond supporting language development, fandom communities may also foster a sense of belonging and connection with others who share similar interests, highlighting the social dimension of language learning in online environments.

2.5.From Imagined Communities to Communities of Practice: Fandoms

The concept of imagined communities provides a useful starting point for understanding fandom participation. As described by Anderson (1983), imagined communities are social groups in which members feel a sense of belonging despite not knowing most of the other members personally. In this sense, fandoms can be understood as imagined communities, as members (fans) identify with a wider global collective of individuals who share similar interests, values, and emotional investments in a particular cultural object, such as a literary series, musical artist, television programme, video game, and so on.

While imagined communities emphasise belonging and identification, participation in fandoms may also develop into a more interactional and practice-based forms of engagement, as it is a participatory culture. Lacasa et al. (2017) argue that participation in fandoms involves undertaking tasks that give meaning to group activities through the interpretation, production, and dissemination of texts. Through these practices, fans become active producers of meaning rather than passive consumers of media content. In this regard, the theory behind the concept of communities of practice (Wenger, 1998; B. Wenger-Trayner and E. Wenger-Trayner, 2015)

adds another perspective. The three dimensions described by B. Wenger-Trayner and E. Wenger-Trayner (2015) can be applied to the fandom structure:

Domain: the shared area of interest. The canonical text, such as a literary series, a musical artist, or a video game.

Community: regular interaction on digital platforms, where the fans discuss content, exchange information, and support one another.

Practice: creation of fanfiction, fan art, translations, theories, and other forms of participatory content.

Through these dimensions, fandoms may be understood as evolving from imagined communities into communities of practice, as participation involves not only identifying with a broader collective, but also engaging actively in shared activities that generate collective and resources over time.

Participation in these fan communities may also contribute to identity formation. Wenger (1998) argues that learning involves not only the development of knowledge and competence but also the construction of the self-identity through participation in social practices. Similarly, Lacasa et al. (2017) demonstrate that fandom participation contributes to both collective and individual identity construction. As members engage with the values, practices, and forms of competence recognised by the community, they negotiate their sense of belonging and position themselves in relation to the other members. As a result, investment in fandoms may contribute to both social affiliation and identity construction through participation in meaningful shared practices.

3. Research Methodology and Method

3.1. Methodological Approach

This dissertation combines quantitative and qualitative approaches to create a mixed-methods research design to examine the relationship between students' participation in fandom related activities and their engagement with English as a Foreign Language (EFL).

On the one hand, the quantitative approach of the research is composed of numerical and categorical data regarding students' exposure to English, the frequency in which the learners participate in fandom activities, and their reading and oral comprehension performance. The quantitative approach is appropriate as this part of the research aims to generate measurable evidence to answer the research questions.

On the other hand, students' attitudes, personal experiences, motivations, and perceptions are explored in the qualitative part of the data collection. The qualitative approach allows to gather data and understand complex phenomena which would be difficult to quantify as numerical data, such as perspectives, perceptions, and so on.

Despite having a combination of both methodological perspectives to obtain measurable data alongside in-depth insights into the participants' experiences and perceptions, the framing of the dissertation is from a qualitative perspective. As such, the emphasis is on how students experience fandom participation and how it shapes their engagement with EFL rather than obtaining percentages of engagement increase.

As the study relies heavily on qualitative methods it is also described as action research which Johnson (2012) defines as a type of research in which educators examine their teaching practices and their results, with the objective of learning how to affect positively the classroom environment.

3.2.Context of Data Collection

The research and data collection for this dissertation was conducted during the practicum period and learning situation implementation within the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) class in a public secondary school in a neighbourhood in Esplugues de Llobregat, Catalonia, Spain.

The new curriculum shifts education away from memorisation, focusing on the ability of students to apply knowledge to real-world challenges. This include four main elements: competences, which are the combination of knowledge, skills, and attitudes that the learners need, the practical knowledge required to develop theses competencies (*sabers*), learning situations, which are real-world scenarios where students can develop and apply what they are learning, and a continuous and formative assessment, which measures the competency criteria rather than a memorisation-based exam.

The EFL subject also includes different key transversal competences, divided into ones approached by specific areas, such as the linguistic communication competence, the plurilingual competence, and the cultural awareness and expression competence, and the transversal competences, which include digital competence, personal, social, and learning to learn competence, citizenship competence, and entrepreneur competence.

Furthermore, every lesson plan must incorporate the educational vectors, which guide the educational decisions, programmes, and methodologies used in the school centre. The new curriculum includes 6 educational vectors: universal design, gender perspective, emotional well-being, democratic citizenship, language quality, and digital competence.

Based on the new curriculum, the EFL subject, which is a compulsory foreign language subject, combines textbook-based activities with communicative tasks, audiovisual resources, and digital learning tools. Nevertheless, in addition to formal classroom instruction, students

are regularly exposed to English through informal settings, including social media platforms, music, series, and videogames. Consequently, this context provides an appropriate context for investigating the influence of fandom participation and informal exposure to English on students' language learning experiences and academic engagement.

During the second placement a learning situation was implemented as part of the master's degree. This learning situation titled "Down the rabbit hole: a 'get reading with me' video review" was based on the context and challenge of the 2nd ESO classes not having a high percentage of students who read for pleasure. Using the literary classic *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll and having a video as a final product, it allowed students to engage with the text in a meaningful and competency-based way, practising reading, vocabulary, grammar, and oral production. Activities, such as the reading comprehension tasks, and field notes during the implementation were used as evidence regarding the topic of the dissertation. In addition to contextual data on students' behaviour, participation, and engagement.

3.3.Participants

The participants in this research consisted of students enrolled in 2nd ESO of the public secondary school during the practicum period. The sample included 61 students aged between 13 to 15, as some of them were doing a repeat year.

Participants were selected through convenience sampling, which according to the Cambridge Dictionary entry is "a way of sampling that involves using people who are easily available", due to the direct access to the groups during the implementation period. The learners presented diverse levels of engagement with English both within and beyond the classroom environment. While on some cases the only contact with English was during the classes, within the school's boundaries, in other cases the students had other points of contact as they stated

they watched series and movies in English, played videogames, followed influencers whose main language was English, or had a private tutor or academy classes.

Participation in the study was voluntary, and students were informed of the objectives and procedures of the research prior to data collection. The sample included students with Specific Educational Support Needs (NESE) type A and B, such as learners diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), as well as Special Educational Needs (NEE), including students within the autism spectrum. As the focus of the study is to examine students' perceptions and engagements with the EFL subject and its learning process, the inclusion of participants with diverse educational profiles was considered relevant to obtaining a comprehensive understanding of the educational experience and an accurate reflection of diversity.

3.4.Data Collection Tools

With the aim of answering the research questions formulated during the beginning of the research, a combination of quantitative and qualitative data collection tools was used during the second placement period to ensure that the data reflected authentic results (Cohen et al., 2018, p.32).

1. **Questionnaire (Google Forms):** Designed and administered online during class time to ensure a high response rate. It was divided into various sections and included both closed-ended and Likert-scale questions and was divided into sections that collected quantitative data, such as frequencies, percentages, and scale responses, categorical data, which included types of fandoms and content the learners participated in, and finally, qualitative insights through short open-ended responses (Cohen et al., 2018, pp.471-488).

- a. Background information: age and basic contextual data of the student.

- b. Fandom knowledge and participation: knowledge of fandoms, level of involvement, types of fandoms (e.g., music, sports, series, videogames), frequency of participation, and language used in communication and content (Catalan, Spanish, and/or English).
 - c. Exposure to English: types of input (e.g., subtitles, videos, lyrics, posts), frequency of exposure, formal (academies, private tutoring) and informal learning experiences.
 - d. Attitudes and engagement: Likert-scale items measuring motivation, participation in class, perceived usefulness of English, and the influence of personal interests (including fandoms) on classroom engagement.
2. **Reading comprehension task and exam:** The learning situation task and the reading comprehension exam were designed to assess students' proficiency in reading comprehension. The results were used to compare performance between students involved in fandom communities and those who are not involved. The reading comprehension task was part of the learning situation, and it contained a graded version of the first three chapters of the literary classic *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll. The reading exam was a biographical sketch about Lewis Carroll.
 3. **Focus group interview:** a semi-structured focus group interview was conducted to gain deeper insight into students' experiences with fandoms and their perceptions of English. Rather than being a structure interview, it was a semi-structured interview, as it allowed for guided questions and spontaneous ones depending on the answer of the participants. This flexible structure, while ensuring that the areas and topics the interview were addressed, it led more detailed qualitative data. The participants were four volunteers who, at the beginning of the second placement, had expressed being part of at least one fandom where English was the main language of communication. Which was crucial for

the type of data that the focus group interview had to collect. This session was audio-recorded and later transcribed for analysis to preserve participants' anonymity.

4. **Field notes:** Field notes taken during the implementation period were used to compare performance between students involved in fandoms and those who are not regarding oral comprehension levels. The observation notes enabled an in-depth examination regarding the oral comprehension of the learners, which included classroom explanations and interactions (Creswell, 2009). In addition, they gave a deeper insight on particular cases or comments made by the students which were relevant to the dissertation.

3.5.Data Collection Procedures

As abovementioned, the data collection process was carried out over the course of the second placement of the practicum period during regular English lessons, as such all the students were able to participate on the activities related to the learning situation and after finishing, those who volunteered could complete the optional part, for instance the questionnaire. However, to ensure that the number of questionnaire and the grades for the reading comprehension tasks and the oral comprehension field notes were the same, those students who opted out of the voluntary part of the class schedule, were not considered as part of the research. Nevertheless, their grades were not affected negatively because of their decision, as participation was voluntary.

The online questionnaire was administered collectively during class time using digital devices, that the school had provided the students at the beginning of the course. This ensured a high response rate and allowed students to complete the questionnaire under the same conditions.

As mentioned before, students completed the reading comprehension activities as part of the learning situation. The results obtained were analysed in relation to students' reported levels of fandom participation and exposure to English outside of the classroom.

Regarding the focus group interview, it was conducted separately with volunteer participants who had expressed clear and strong opinions about their fandom participation and how that helped them with their EFL. The interview was carried out in a relaxed and collaborative environment in order to encourage open discussion and authentic responses.

Throughout the implementation of the learning situation, field notes were taken to document students' investment and engagement, as well as their oral comprehension levels.

After the data collection phase, quantitative data was organised and analysed through frequencies, percentages, and comparative observations.

The results of the questionnaire were put into an Excel and later translated into graphics and percentages to obtain comparative results, such as the average level of oral comprehension in English between those students who said they are part of an English-mediated fandom and those who said that they are not part of an English-mediated fandom, although they may be part of a Spanish or Catalan mediated one.

The qualitative data obtained from the focus group interview and the field notes were categorised to identify recurring patterns and significant insights related to the research questions.

Figure 1. Visual timeline of data collection



3.6.Ethical Procedures

Ethical considerations were carefully addressed throughout the research process. Participants' anonymity and confidentiality were guaranteed through pseudonyms and the removal of any identifying information from the collected data.

Participation in the questionnaire and focus group interview was voluntary, and students were informed of the research purposes and informed that they could choose to withdraw from these specific parts of the study without consequences on their final grades as they did not account for a specific percentage of their marks. Furthermore, the remaining data collection instruments, including the reading comprehension tasks and field notes were integrated into the regular teaching and assessment process of the curriculum and implementation. As a result, students could choose to complete the learning situation and the classroom activities without participating in the study. Nevertheless, in the case of being part

of the study, all data derived from these activities was anonymised and used exclusively for academic and research purposes.

Regarding the audio recording from the focus group interview, it was solely used for transcription² and analysis. Moreover, it was securely stored and handled in accordance with ethical principles governing educational research, including confidentiality, informed consent, respect for participants, and responsible data management.

3.7.Chapter Summary

Chapter 3 presented the methodological approach used for this research. Therefore, the following table (Table 1) has been designed to illustrate the relationship between the research questions (RQ), the methodology used to collect data and the type of data that has been obtained.

Table 1. Alignment of Research Questions and Data Collection Instruments

Research question	Data sources	Type of data
RQ1. To what extent do 2nd ESO students participate in <i>fandoms</i> where English is the main language of communication?	Questionnaire	Quantitative
RQ2. What types of English input, such as posts, subtitles, lyrics, fanfiction and so on, do students encounter through their <i>fandom interactions</i>?	Questionnaire	Quantitative and qualitative
RQ3. Do students who participate in English-mediated <i>fandoms</i> demonstrate	Reading comprehension task, and questionnaire;	Quantitative

² See Appendix I for the Focus interview transcription.

higher levels of reading and oral comprehension than students who do not?	Field notes	Qualitative
RQ4. How do students involved in <i>fandoms</i> perceive English as a school subject compared to their non-fandom involved peers?		
	Questionnaire	Quantitative
	Focus group interview	Qualitative
RQ5. How do students involved in English-mediated fandoms perceive the relationship between their informal English learning through fandoms and formal learning at school?		
	Questionnaire;	Quantitative
	Focus group interview and field notes.	Qualitative
RQ6. How does being part of a fandom influence students' motivation, participation and engagement during English lessons?		
	Focus group interview and questionnaire	Qualitative

Chapter 3 also presented the type of research, the participants and the context. As such the following table (Table 2) has been designed to illustrate the contextual information of the dissertation.

Table 2. Overview of the Research Methodology

Research design	Mixed-methods approach with a qualitative perspective
Research type	Action research
Context of data collection	2 nd ESO class from a public secondary school in Esplugues de Llobregat during the second placement.
Participants	61 students from the 2 nd ESO group aged from 13 to 15.
Sampling method	Convenience sampling

4. Results

The empirical data collected during the data collection time comprises a sample of a total of 61 2ⁿ year students ($n = 61$) who completed the compulsory activities and the voluntary ones, such as the questionnaire. To ensure analytical rigor and clarity, the raw data gathered from the student responses was processed and organized using Google Sheets. This software was subsequently used to generate cross-referenced statistical charts and graphs, allowing for a visual representation of the students' language comprehension levels with the variables of being part of a fandom or going to an academy or having a private tutor. In addition to the data collected during the questionnaire, this Google Sheets was also used to crossmatch the reading and oral comprehension levels to the two variables.

Figure 2. Sample structure of the data organization spreadsheet

	A	B	C	D	E	F
1	NAME OF STUDENT	READING COMPREHENSION	ORAL COMPREHENSION	FANDOM (ENGLISH)	ENGLISH ACADEMY / TEACHER	FANDOM SPANISH / CATALAN
2	Student A1	0-10	LOW	YES	YES	YES
3	Student B1	0-10	AVERAGE	NO	YES	NO
4	Student C1	0-10	HIGH	NO	NO	NO

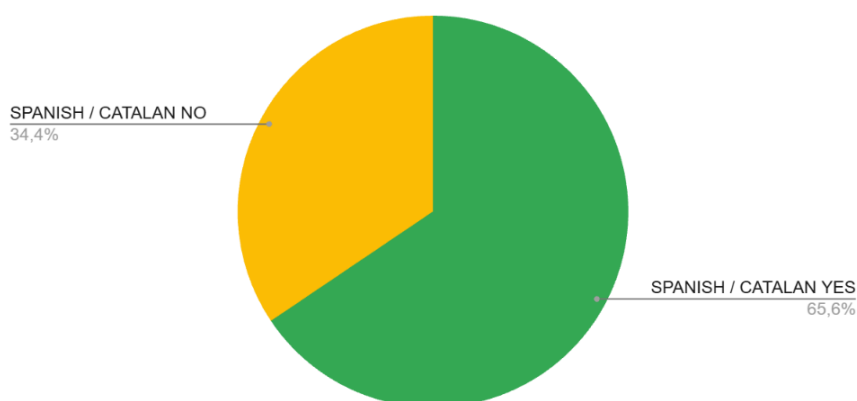
The initial phase of the questionnaire mapped the students' existing investment with fandom spaces with a few questions: Are you a part of a fandom? (series, videogames, music, books, and so on) with a complementary question so that those who said YES, could be able to make a list of the fandoms. It was only after this question that students were able to say which language mediated their fandom (English, Catalan, Spanish, or others).

The baseline data reveals a distinct divergence in fandom participation based on the language medium used by the students:

The majority of the cohort actively participates in fandoms using Spanish or Catalan (65.6%). This indicates that fan culture is a highly familiar and culturally relevant phenomenon for the students as nearly two-thirds of the sample

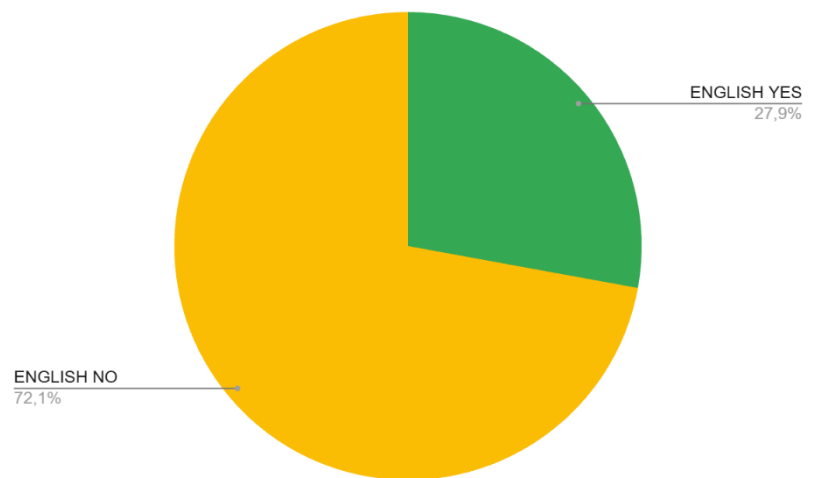
participate, which establishes a strong potential baseline for using students' passions for popular media, sports, or videogames as entry points to teach academic concepts.

Figure 3. Participation in Catalan or Spanish mediated fandoms



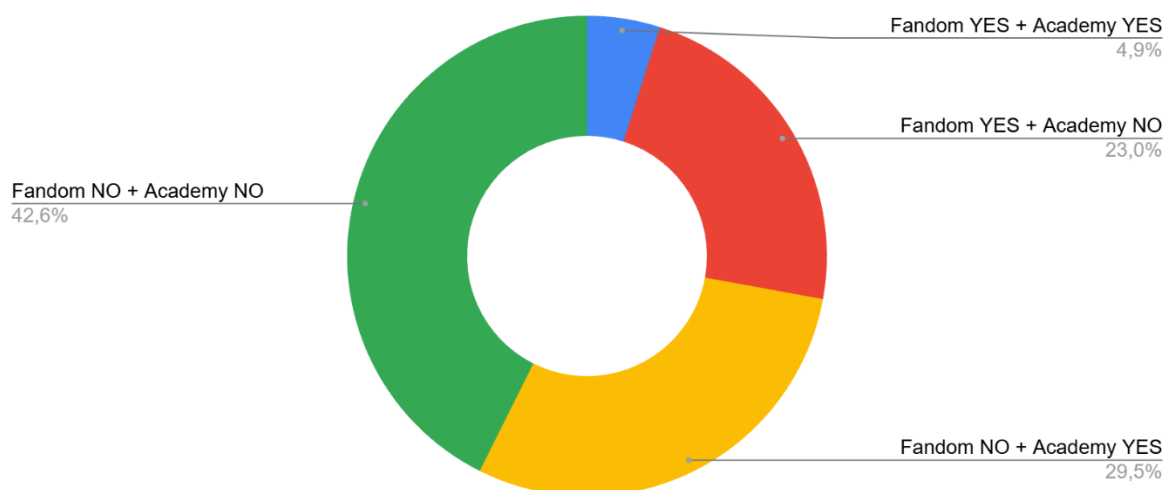
In contrast, active autonomous participation in English-mediated fandom is significantly lower, standing at 27.9%. While more than a quarter of the sample is already navigating these spaces in their EFL, the remaining 72.1% do not instinctively do so.

Figure 4. Participation in English mediated fandoms



To understand the interaction between formal extracurricular study and informal digital immersion, the student cohort ($n = 61$) was segmented into four distinct behavioural profiles.

Figure 5. The behavioural profiles of the sample



1. **The disengaged cohort (Fandom NO + Academy NO — 42.6%, $N = 26$):** The largest demographic, it represents nearly half of the entire class. These 26 students have no external structured English support and do not engage in voluntary, autonomous

English-mediated fan activities online. They are entirely dependent on the compulsory school curriculum for their English input.

2. **The formal learning supported cohort (Fandom NO + Academy YES — 29.5%, $N = 18$):** Comprising 18 students, this group relies strictly on traditional, paid extracurricular frameworks, such as language academies or private tutors, to advance their English proficiency. While they receive significant language exposure outside school hours, it occurs within formal pedagogical settings rather than organic, interest-driven environments.
3. **The fandom driven cohort (Fandom YES + Academy NO — 23.0%, $N = 14$):** This key group of 14 students functions as autonomous language learners. They receive no formal extracurricular tutoring, meaning their exceptionally high language comprehension metrics are driven entirely by their personal immersion in English-speaking fandoms. They represent the empirical proof of fandom-based acquisition within this cohort.
4. **The dual-exposure cohort (Fandom YES + Academy YES — 4.9%, $N = 3$):** A minor fraction of the sample, with only three students, experiences a combined approach. They bridge both institutional tutoring frameworks and digital fan cultures, enjoying both formal structures and informal affective immersion.

With the four student profiles defined, the next step is to examine how these different types of out-of-school exposure correlate with the students' actual grades in oral and reading comprehension.

4.1.Oral Comprehension

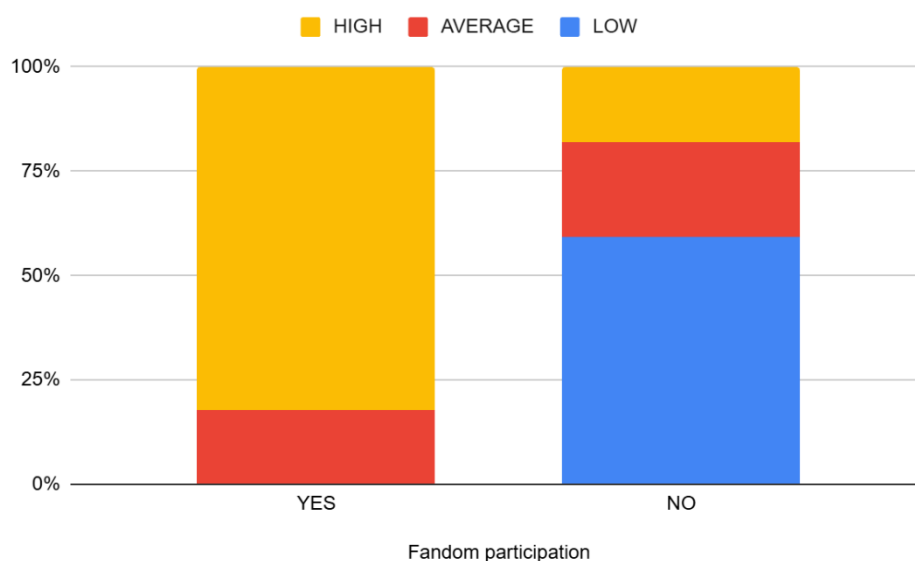
The data shows different distributions of oral comprehension skills when comparing students based on their fandom participation and academy attendance. The levels were categorized using the following criteria:

Low level: The student can only understand basic sentences and needs the information repeated more than three times while using more basic words.

Average level: The student can understand clear, everyday sentences and standard vocabulary. The learner can follow the main points of a conversation or explanation, but may need the information repeated once or twice when more complex words are introduced.

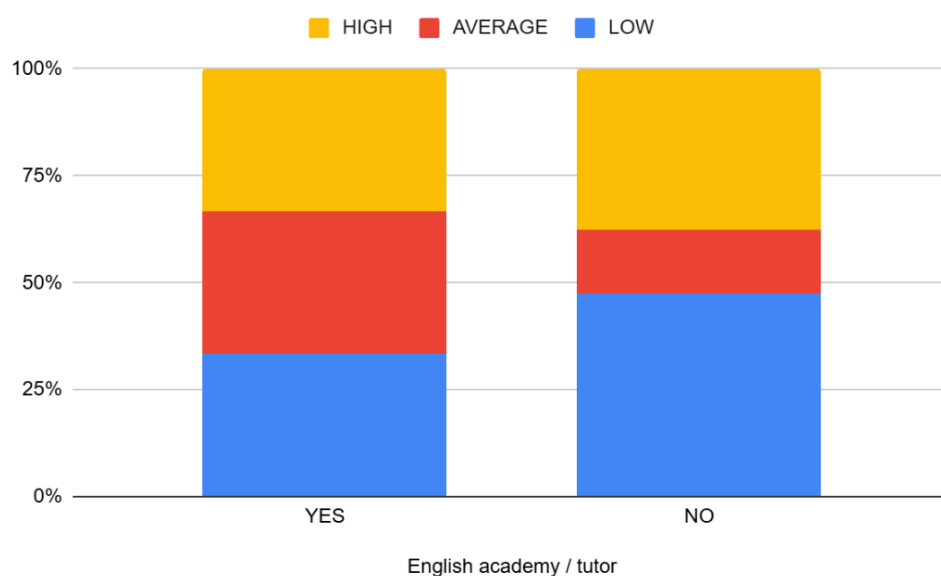
High level: The student can easily understand complex sentences and a wide range of vocabulary. The learner can follow authentic conversations and lengthy explanations fluently without needing information to be repeated or simplified.

Figure 6. Oral comprehension level and fandom participation



Within the “Fandom YES” group, which includes those who participate in English-mediated fandoms, 82.4% achieved a high level of oral comprehension, 17.6% achieved an average level, and 0% scored a low level. Within the "Fandom NO" group, which includes those who stated they do not participate in English-mediated fandoms, 18.2% had a high level of oral comprehension, 22.7% had an average level, and 59.1% had a low level.

Figure 7. Oral comprehension level and English academy or private tutor

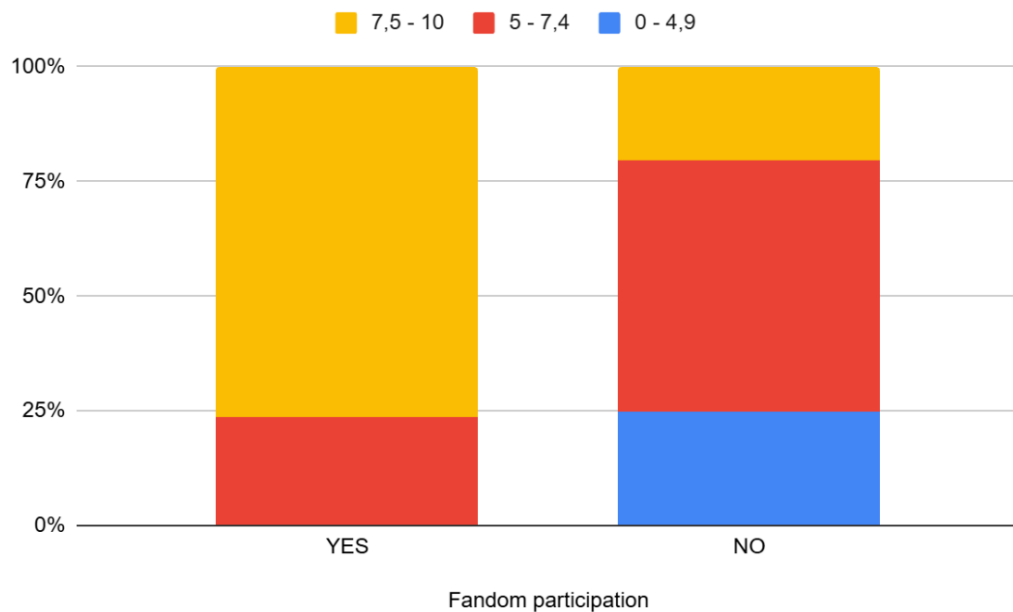


Within the “English academy / tutor YES” group, the distribution shows 33.3% at a high level, 33.3% at an average level, and 33.3% at a low level. Within the “English academy / tutor NO” group, 37.5% scored high, 15% scored average, and 47.5% scored low.

4.2. Reading Comprehension

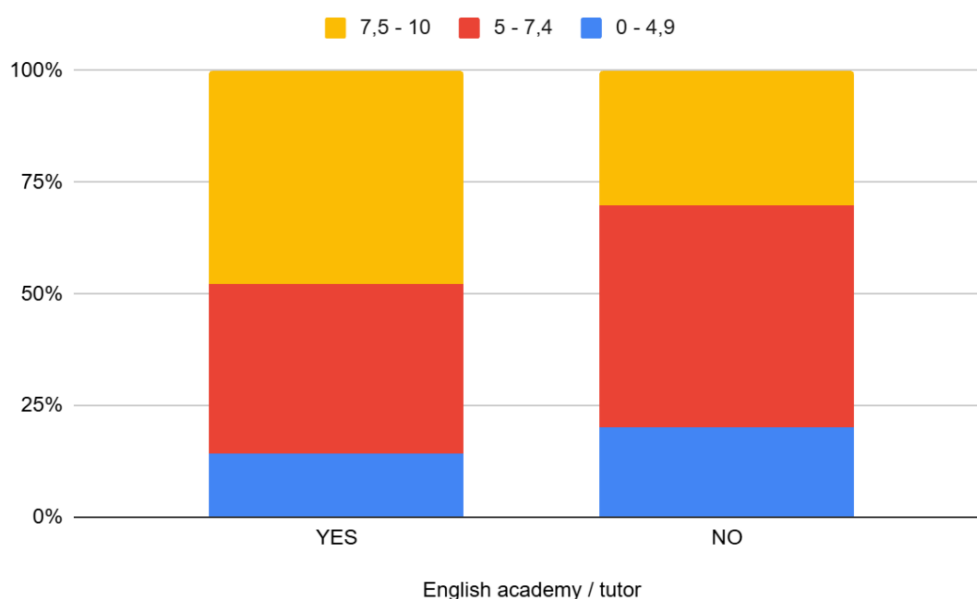
Reading comprehension scores, which were the average of the reading comprehension test and various activities done during the learning situation, were categorised using a numerical grading scale: 0 – 4.9 / 5 – 7.4 / 7.5-10. The 0 – 4.9 bracket isolates the Not Achieved (NA) threshold. The 5 – 7.4 and 7.5 – 10 brackets were established to separate students with an average, standard grasp of grade-level expectations from those who display an advanced level of English.

Figure 8. Reading comprehension level and fandom participation



Within the “Fandom YES” group, which includes those who participate in English-mediated fandoms, 76.5% achieved a high level of reading comprehension, in other words the learners scored in the 7.5 – 10 bracket. 23.5% achieved an average level (5 – 7.4 bracket), and 0% scored a low level (0 – 4.9 bracket). Within the "Fandom NO" group, which includes those who stated they do not participate in English-mediated fandoms, 20.5% scored high, 54.5% scored average, and 25% scored low.

Figure 9. Reading comprehension level and English academy or private tutor



In the “Englis academy / tutor YES” category, which includes those who have extra formal learning, 47.6% achieved a high level of reading comprehension, as 10 learners scored in the 7.5 – 10 bracket. 38.1% achieved an average level (5 – 7.4 bracket), and 14.3% scored a low level (0 – 4.9 bracket). Within the “Englis academy / tutor NO” group, which includes those who do not have extracurricular formal learning, 30% scored between 7.5 and 10, 50% had a grade from the 5 – 7.4 bracket, and 20% had a NA grade.

4.3.English Input Through Fandom Interaction

Among the 27.9% of students that answered they were part of an English-mediated fandom, approximately half of the students reported reading fanfiction of the fandom of their choice, such as Formula 1, music artists, series, and so on.

Furthermore, the fandom members indicated that sometimes they used English subtitles as a medium when consuming audiovisual content in other languages, and Spanish and Catalan subtitles were not available. In addition to reading posts from different fandom communities,

not only from fans as themselves, but also from the artist, the author or other news, using online platforms such as X, and Instagram.

4.4. Focus Group Interview

The focus interview was conducted in a mix of English and Catalan to ensure that students could express themselves as much as they wanted, but also to take field notes on English oral comprehension of learners who had stated they were part of a fandom. Four volunteer students took part in the interview, and it was conducted in a space chosen by the students, the indoor playground, as it was of the utmost importance they felt comfortable sharing their experience.

To preserve participants' anonymity, students were assigned the pseudonyms Student A, Student B, Student C, and Student D. Quotations are identified using codes FGI (Focus Group Interview) and SA, SB, SC, SD (Student A/B/C/D)³.

4.4.1. Social Media and the Lingua Franca

All participants reported that social media platforms played a central role in their entry into fandom communities. While some students were introduced to fandoms by friends (Students B, C and D), they later deepened their involvement through platforms such as YouTube, Tumblr, TikTok, Instagram, X, and Pinterest.

"A través de YouTube i Tumblr. Al principi vaig començar veient vídeos i després vaig començar a escriure comentaris" (FGI-SA).

"Vaig començar a mirar vídeos a TikTok, fotos a Pinterest..." (FGI-SC).

³ See Appendix I for the full transcription of the focus group interview.

Learners also consistently described English as the primary language used to communicate with other fans online. They stated viewing English as a practical tool that enables interaction with international communities and access to fandom-related content.

"Sí, al final és com l'idioma que tothom sap" (FGI-SC).

"En els jocs online, normalment al xat es parla en anglès" (FGI-SD).

Students did not perceive English as a barrier; rather, they considered it a facilitating element for participation in global fandom spaces.

4.4.2. Language Development through Fandom Participation

A recurring theme during the focus interview was the acquisition of vocabulary and expressions through fandom participation. Students stated they were familiar with specialised terminology related to their interests and often recalled the English terms faster than their Catalan or Spanish equivalents.

"Em surt més ràpid la paraula *driver* que *pilot*" (FGI-SC).

Throughout the interview, the students also highlighted how repeated exposure to authentic content helped them expand their lexical repertoire and improved their comprehension skills. Furthermore, they shared the perception of fandom participation as beneficial for their English development, particularly in reading comprehension, listening comprehension and overall fluency.

"Ara entenc molt millor el que llegeixo en anglès" (FGI-SA).

"Els típics vídeos d'entrevistes [...] ara els entenc molt millor que abans" (FGI-SC).

When asked, participants attributed these improvements to their regular interaction with the English language in fandom spaces.

4.4.3. Fandoms, Reading and Motivation

Students identified fanfiction as a valuable resource for developing reading habits in English. Familiarity with characters and storylines reduced the difficulty of reading in a foreign language and encouraged progression towards more complex texts.

"Algú pot començar a interessar-se per llegir en anglès després d'haver llegit fanfiction" (FGI-SB).

"Jo vaig començar llegint fanfiction [...] i després vaig passar a novel·les en anglès" (FGI-SD).

The participants unanimously stated that fandom participation increased their motivation to learn English. Unlike classroom activities, fandom-related content was perceived as personally meaningful and intrinsically motivating.

"M'interessa poder entendre el que es diu a les meves pel·lícules preferides sense haver de posar els subtítols" (FGI-SC).

"És com si tinguessis un objectiu que va més enllà de la nota" (FGI-SB).

English learning was linked to their personal interests rather than solely to academic achievement.

In conclusion, the focus group participants indicated that participation in English-mediated fandoms provided meaningful opportunities for authentic language use and promoted interaction with international communities. In addition to enhancing vocabulary and comprehension skills, while also increasing motivation to learn and invest in English beyond the academic requirements.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study provide important insights into the role that English-mediated fandoms can play in the language learning experience of 2n ESO students. At the beginning of the research and to address the dissertation objectives the general research question which was the following one:

How does participation in English mediated fandoms influences students' perception and investment with English as a Foreign Language?

Overall, the results suggest that participation in English-mediated fandom communities is associated with higher levels of English proficiency, in this case in oral and reading comprehension as the tested skills and may represent a significant source of informal language learning outside the classroom.

In addition to the general research question, six specific research questions were formulated to explore different dimensions of the relationship between fandom participation and English language proficiency.

RQ1. To what extent do 2nd ESO students participate in fandoms where English is the main language of communication? The results revealed that 27.9% of the students actively engage in fandoms where English is the primary language of communication in their daily lives. Although this represents a minority of the sample, it demonstrates that a considerable percentage of students interact voluntarily with English beyond formal educational contexts. Moreover, it is theoretically significant when interpreted through the concept of imagined communities. According to Anderson (1991), members of a community may feel a sense of belonging even without direct interaction with most members, as the community exists socially and symbolically rather than physically

From this perspective, fandom participation reflects students' engagement with global imagined communities that extend beyond the classroom. These learners voluntarily position themselves within global networks of fans who share interests, values, and cultural references. This aligns with Norton's (2003) argument that imagined communities can strongly influence learners' present engagement and identity construction, sometimes even more than their immediate social contexts.

Therefore, even though only a minority of the sample participate in English-mediated fandoms, their engagement is not marginal in theoretical terms as it represents a process of investment in imagined global identities through English. As a result, English is the conduit to meaningful communities beyond school the school walls (Norton, 2010).

RQ2. What types of English input, such as posts, subtitles, lyrics, fanfiction and so on, do students encounter through their *fandom interactions*? The findings revealed that students participating in English-mediated fandoms are exposed to a wide variety of English input across different digital environments. According to the questionnaire, 50% of the 27.9% of students who participate in English-mediated fandoms reported reading fanfiction related to their fandom of choice using platforms such as Archive of Our Own (AO3), which is a nonprofit, open-source repository for fanfiction written by users. This type of content exposes learners to an informal and creative way of using English, more aligned to their personal interests, while being produced by members of the community, which reflects the participatory nature of fandoms described by Jenkins et al. (2009).

Furthermore, students reported using English subtitles when consuming audiovisual content in cases where subtitles in Spanish or Catalan were not available. Some students disclosed that these were often available earlier than the translations to their first language, this one being Spanish or Catalan. Therefore, learners already use English as a *lingua franca* in contemporary digital environments. As Llorca (2020) argues, English increasingly functions as a global language

that allows users to access information, entertainment, and communities regardless of the original language of the content. In addition, all participants in this subgroup reported reading posts within fandom communities, including content created by other fans as well as official updates from artists, authors, or media sources. Such practices provide continuous exposure to genuine language in different formats and contexts, which as explained by Sockett (2014) can be understood as OILE, due to learners acquiring English incidentally while engaging in online activities primarily motivated by entertainment, communication, or personal interests rather than explicit language-learning goals.

The focus group interview, and the open-ended questions of the questionnaire further support these findings by illustrating the variety of English input students encounter through their fandom participation. Students reported consuming content across multiple platforms, including YouTube, Tumblr, TikTok, Instagram, X, Pinterest, and online games. These platforms expose learners to a broad range of English usage, including comments, discussions, interviews, livestreams, and so on.

Finally, the focus group also highlighted the role of English as a *lingua franca* (Llurda, 2020) within the fandom spaces. This suggests that fandom participation provides students with regular access to authentic, multimodal English input that extends beyond traditional educational materials and promotes meaningful language use in personally relevant contexts.

RQ3. Do students who participate in English mediated *fandoms* demonstrate higher levels of reading comprehension than students who do not? The results indicate that learners who are fandom members, have a substantially higher level of reading comprehension than those classmates that do not participate in English-mediated fandoms. Among fandom participants, 76.5% achieved a high level of reading comprehension (RC), having grades between the 7.5 and 10, while the remaining 23.5% achieved an average reading comprehension level, with grades between 5 and 7.4. Notably, none of the students in this group scored below 5, in the low-level

category. In contrast, only 20.5% of non-participants achieved a high level of RC, while 54.5% obtained average results and 25% scored within the low-level category.

According to Norton's (2013) theory of investment, learners engage more deeply with a language when it provides access to valued identities and communities. Fandoms are one of the communities that provide that access as, for instance, learners read because they want to participate in communities they care about, not because they are required to. In addition, fandoms can be understood as communities of practice (Wenger, 1998), where reading fanfiction, posts, or updates is part of legitimate participation. It is that constant exposure to written English which contributes to the development of vocabulary knowledge, reading fluency, and comprehension skills.

RQ4. Do students who participate in English mediated *fandoms* demonstrate higher levels of oral comprehension than students who do not? The results show a clear difference in oral comprehension levels between students who participate in English-mediated fandoms and those who do not. Within the fandom group, 82.4% of students achieved a high level of oral comprehension, while the remaining 17.6% achieved an average level. No student in this group was classified as having a low level of oral comprehension. By contrast, among students who did not participate in English-mediated fandoms, only 18.2% achieved a high level, 22.7% achieved an average level, and 59.1% were classified within the low-level category.

This evidence suggest that participation in English-mediated fandoms is associated with stronger oral comprehension skills. According to Sockett (2014) and the OILE research, regular exposure to spoken English through videos, livestreams, podcasts, interviews, gaming content, and other fandom-related media provides learners with frequent opportunities to hear authentic language in meaningful contexts, rather than with an explicit language learning goal. As a result, students involved in English-speaking fandoms appear to develop higher levels of listening comprehension than their peers who do not engage in this type of activities.

As abovementioned, fandoms can also be understood as communities of practice (Wenger, 1998), where the practices of watching interviews, videos, and so on, can be part of their participation. In these spaces, learners are exposed to English as a tool for communication and, through repeated encounters in the communities of practice, learners may become increasingly familiar with linguistic patterns, vocabulary, and discourse conventions, which are not part of the school curriculum.

Finally, an additional finding emerged when crossmatching oral comprehension results and the extracurricular English attendance: Within the “English academy / tutor YES” group, students were evenly distributed across the high, average, and low level, with 33.3% in each level. Nevertheless, within the “English academy / tutor NO” group, 37.5% scored high, 15% scored average, and 47.5% scored low. This phenomenon happened as most of the students who participate in fandoms and obtained a “high” oral comprehension level, do not attend an academy or have a private tutor. In addition to the disengaged cohort, which does not have a presence neither in fandoms nor in formal learning extracurricular settings. As a result, and supporting Sockett’s (2014) notion of OILE, English-mediated fandoms can provide opportunities to exposure to English used outside formal educational settings. Taking Norton’s (2013) investment theory into account, the same explanation for reading comprehension can be applied to oral comprehension: learners listen to and process spoken English because it enables them to participate in communities they care about, not because they are required to do so.

RQ5. How do students involved in English-mediated fandoms perceive the relationship between their informal English learning through fandoms and formal learning at school? Students involved in English-mediated fandoms perceive a strong and positive relationship between the informal and formal learning experience. Rather than viewing both types as unrelated, the learners consistently described them as interconnected and mutually reinforcing.

Students recognise fandom participation as a significant source of language learning that supports their academic performance in EFL. Students reported that exposure to English through fandom related activities, such as watching videos, reading posts, participating in online discussions, and consuming media content, helps them develop vocabulary, reading comprehension, and listening skills that are later transferable to classroom tasks, which is consistent with Norton's (2013) investment theory.

In addition, participants emphasised the meaningful contextualisation that fandom engagement provides, which can be sometimes absent from formal settings. During the focus group interview, Student B described English as a tool that goes beyond grades, highlighting its usefulness for communication and global interaction, while Student D noted that classroom activities are not always based on topics of personal interest, in contrast to the highly engaging nature of fandom content. This contrast can be interpreted through Norton's (2013) investment theory and Kanno and Norton's (2003) discussion on imagined communities: fandom participation is connected to learners' interests, identities, and valued communities and, as a result, students may foster a stronger investment in EFL in these informal environments, resulting in greater engagement and sustained exposure to the language.

Furthermore, students identified clear instances of transfer between informal and formal learning contexts. Vocabulary acquired through fandom participation frequently appears in classroom comprehension, with learners reporting that certain English terms become more accessible due to repeated exposure in authentic contexts. Student C, for example, explained that fandom-related terminology is often retrieved more quickly than its equivalents in their first language, demonstrating how informal exposure shapes lexical access.

In essence, students do not conceptualise formal and informal English learning as separate domains. Instead, they perceive fandom participation as an extension of their learning process,

which reinforces classroom instruction while simultaneously providing authentic, meaningful, and motivating opportunities for language use.

RQ6. How does being part of a *fandom* influence students' motivation, participation and engagement during English lessons? According to the data collected, participation in English-mediated fandoms appears to have a positive influence on students' motivation, participation, and engagement in English learning. Throughout the implementation, the questionnaire and the focus group interview, participants reported that their fandom involvement encouraged them to interact with English voluntarily outside school, creating opportunities for exposure and practice. Students repeatedly described fandom-related activities as enjoyable and motivating because they were connected to topics they genuinely cared about, including Formula 1, anime, books, films, music, and video games, which aligns with Norton's (2013) investment theory, as these topics are part of communities that the students value.

Furthermore, the learners' fandom experiences appeared to increase their confidence when engaging with English in academic context. They stated that fandom participation helped them to expand their vocabulary, and improve their comprehension levels, making it easier to understand texts or listening exercises done in class. The perceptions expressed by the focus group align with the quantitative findings, which showed that students who participate in English-mediated fandoms achieved substantially higher levels of reading and oral comprehension than their non-participating peers. From the perspective of Sockett's (2014) concept of OILE, these findings suggest that sustained exposure to genuine English through digital leisure activities may contribute to language development beyond formal instruction.

The fandom driven cohort achieved exceptionally high comprehension outcomes despite not attending an English academy or having a private tutor. This suggests that participation in fandoms can function as a powerful source of autonomous language learning, as it provides extensive exposure to authentic English outside formal educational settings. In

contrast, the largest group, the disengaged cohort, who neither participated in fandoms nor received extracurricular English support, relied exclusively on classroom instruction and generally demonstrated lower comprehension outcomes.

Moreover, for students who are members of a fandom, EFL becomes a personal goal rather than simply a school subject. Students expressed a desire to understand their favourite books, films, music, games, and so on. Student C, for example, explained that learning English allows them to understand films and songs without relying on subtitles. This type of comment reflects a form of intrinsic motivation in which learners invest in English because it enables access to communities, identities, and experiences that they personally value (Norton, 2013).

Finally, the participatory nature of fandoms may also explain the high levels of investment reported by the learners. According to Jenkins et al. (2009), fandoms are participatory cultures in which members actively contribute, share, and interact with content rather than simply consume it. As a result, English becomes a meaningful tool for communication, entertainment, and social interaction. The increased investment in the language appears to encourage sustained exposure to English beyond the classroom, which is reflected on the significantly higher comprehension levels observed among fandom participants.

6. Conclusions

This dissertation set out to investigate how participation in English-mediated fandoms influences 2nd ESO students' perceptions and investment in English as a Foreign Language (EFL). The findings indicate that participation in English-mediated fandoms is positively associated with students' investment in English, their motivation to learn the language, and their development of reading and oral comprehension skills. Although only 27.9% of the participants reported an active involvement in English-mediated fandoms, the students who were part of this percentage demonstrated substantially higher levels of reading and oral comprehension than their peers who stated not participating in such communities.

The study also revealed that fandoms provide learners with extensive exposure to authentic English through a wide range of digital practices, including reading fanfiction, following social media posts, watching videos and interviews, participating in online discussions, and consuming audiovisual content with English subtitles. These findings support previous research on Online Informal Learning of English (OILE) by Sockett (2014) and suggest that meaningful exposure to English outside formal educational contexts can contribute to language development.

Regarding students' perceptions, the research participants viewed fandom participation and classroom learning as complementary rather than separate experiences. They reported transferring vocabulary and comprehension strategies acquired through fandom interactions into formal learning contexts. Furthermore, students described the English language as a useful tool for accessing content, interacting with others, and participating in communities that were personally meaningful to them, aligning the concept of "fandom" to Norton's concept of "investment" as it exemplifies how language learning is closely connected to learners' identities, interests, and future aspirations.

It is also essential to highlight the importance of participation in meaningful communities. The results of this research study agree with Kanno and Norton (2003) and their argument on how learners often invest in language learning because it enables access to imagined communities that are personally significant. In the present study, fandoms appeared to function as such communities, providing students with opportunities to engage with people, content, and identities that extended beyond their immediate social environments. As participation became more regular and interactional, these fandoms could also be understood as communities of practice (Wenger, 1998), where students engaged in shared activities, consumed fan-generated, and official content, and used English as a means of participation and communication.

From a pedagogical perspective, this research has essential implications. As a future teacher, this study has reinforced the importance of recognising students' interests, and extracurricular experiences as valuable resources for language learning. It has also highlighted that meaningful engagement with English often occurs beyond the classroom and that learners may develop significant language skills through activities that they perceive as enjoyable and personally relevant.

Nevertheless, several limitations of the present research must be acknowledged. On one hand, the study was conducted with a relatively small sample from a single educational context, which limits the generalisability of the findings. And, on the other hand, the research focused primarily on reading and oral comprehension and did not examine other language skills such as speaking or writing.

Despite these limitations, the findings suggest that English-mediated fandoms can constitute meaningful spaces for language learning, identity construction, and participation in global communities. By providing authentic opportunities to use and engage with English,

fandoms appear to foster learners' investment in the language and support their development as active users of English beyond the classroom.

This dissertation has raised several questions for future studies. Researchers could explore whether similar patterns are found among students of different age groups or educational stages, examine the relationship between fandom participation and productive language skills such as speaking and writing, or investigate how different types of fandoms may influence language development in different ways, or recreate the same study but with a bigger sample.

In conclusion, I hope to continue investigating the educational value of informal learning environments and the role they can play in fostering students' engagement. Furthermore, I aim to apply the insights gained from this study in my own classroom by creating learning experiences that connect with students' interests, promote authentic language use, and encourage greater investment in English learning. In doing so, I hope to help learners see English not only as a school subject, but also as a tool for communication, participation, and personal growth, which is how I see it.

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8. Appendices

Appendix I: Focus Interview Transcription

Note: The following interview transcript is presented *verbatim*. The transcription reproduces the participants' speech as accurately as possible, including language used during the interview, grammatical features, colloquialisms, slang, repetitions, hesitations, incomplete sentences, and so on. No corrections have been made to vocabulary, grammar, or style.

Researcher: First of all, I would like to thank you all for being here and helping me with my research! This audio recording will only be used to create a transcript of the interview so that I can conduct and complete my research on fandoms, engagement, investment and motivation. Do you all agree to being audio-recorded for these purposes?

Student A: Sí, accepto!

Student B: Jo també accepto.

Student C: Accepto que es gravi l'entrevista.

Student D: Sí, accepto!

Researcher: So, at the beginning of the second placement period, you all told me that you are part of various fandoms, such as Formula 1, right? How did you enter the world of fandoms, specifically English-mediated ones? Through a friend? Social media?

Student A: A través de YouTube i Tumblr. Al principi vaig començar veient vídeos i després vaig començar a escriure comentaris.

Student B: Jo vaig arribar als fandoms, sobretot al de la Fórmula 1, gràcies a les meves amigues, perquè elles sempre estaven veient les carreres i comentant i jo no en tenia ni idea. Així que vaig preguntar i, la veritat, quan ho vaig veure per primera vegada no em va semblar

res fora del normal. Però a l'estiu em vaig posar a veure més contingut i, des de llavors, aquí estem.

Researcher: And other fandoms apart from Formula 1?

Student B: Diria que el món de l'anime. Sobretot d'un anime que es diu *Haikyuu!*.

Researcher: Yes, I know it!

Student B: M'encanta l'anime i també la comunitat que hi ha formada al voltant. Segueixo comptes d'Instagram i d'X que pugen contingut.

Researcher: And what about you two? Did you enter a fandom thanks to a friend or by yourselves?

Student C: Jo vaig arribar al món de la Fórmula 1 gràcies a l'Student A! Em va dir de quedar un dia i, just quan vaig arribar a casa seva, estava veient una cursa. A partir de llavors vam començar a quedar tots els divendres que hi havia cursa! I jo, pel meu compte, vaig començar a mirar vídeos a TikTok, fotos a Pinterest, etc.

Researcher: Any other things, such as films, series, games or music, that you consider yourself a fan of?

Student C: *Percy Jackson*, 100%! I també *Ales de sang*, de Rebecca Yarros!

Researcher: Do you think that, book-wise, it is easier to communicate with other fans using social media, for instance TikTok and X?

Student C: Oi tant! Pots respondre publicacions i tenir una conversa amb gent que és a l'altra punta del món.

Researcher: And do you use English as your main language for that communication?

Student C: Sí, al final és com l'idioma que tothom sap, almenys una mica; el suficient per dir la teva opinió i expressar si t'ha agradat el llibre o no.

Student D: A mi també em va començar a agradar el tema de la Fórmula 1 per les meves amigues, però ja formava part de fandoms abans!

Researcher: Really? Which ones?

Student D: Sobretot de llibres i videojocs. En els jocs *online*, normalment al xat es parla en anglès.

Researcher: Do you think that people your age use social media to connect with other fandom members, even if they are on the other side of the world?

Student A: Totalment!

Researcher: And do you think it helps promote the use of the English language, or does it create a barrier?

Student B: Doncs jo crec que és una cosa positiva! Al final et permet comunicar-te amb persones de tot el món, encara que no parleva la mateixa llengua.

Student D: Exacte, a més, com veiem aquestes coses en anglès, després també és més fàcil parlar-ne en anglès. Ja tens el vocabulari après.

Student C: Sí, sí! Per exemple, pel tema de la Fórmula 1 em surt més ràpid la paraula *driver* que *pilot*, perquè jo veig la Fórmula 1 en anglès.

Researcher: So does it help you positively or negatively in your learning journey? Do fandom interactions help you in any way with homework or learning new things in class?

Student B: Doncs jo, com les companyes, crec que és una cosa molt bona. Al final ens ajuda a conèixer paraules noves, a entendre millor textos o vídeos i a parlar amb més fluïdesa.

Student C: Totalment, a l'hora d'entendre alguna cosa ajuda molt!

Researcher: Did you notice a change in your reading, listening or overall comprehension level after joining the fandom world?

Student A: Totalment! Ara entenc molt millor el que llegeixo en anglès. A més, jo a vegades veig anime amb subtítols en anglès i ara entenc la majoria de les coses!

Student C: També a l'hora d'escoltar, jo crec. Els típics vídeos d'entrevistes que fan als actors quan estrenen una sèrie ara els entenc molt millor que abans.

Researcher: Do you think that if your classmates also found something that interested them in English, they would have more fun or more motivation to learn?

Student D: I tant! Jo des de petita a casa he estat veient pel·lícules en anglès perquè els meus pares me les posaven en versió original, i gràcies a això he crescut sent fan de moltes coses: *Harry Potter*, *Star Wars*... I això també m'ha ajudat a l'hora d'aprendre anglès, ja que els *listennings* són més fàcils.

Student A: Els meus pares també ho feien amb la meva germana i amb mi, i ara és part de la rutina. Cada setmana veiem una pel·lícula en anglès els divendres. Al principi vam començar amb subtítols en castellà, després en anglès, i ara ja no els utilitzem.

Researcher: As you know, there is a lot of content produced within a fandom, for example fanfiction. What do you think about it? Is it a useful tool for learning English?

Student B: Doncs jo crec que sí. Algú pot començar a interessar-se per llegir en anglès després d'haver llegit fanfiction d'algun fandom.

Student D: Exacte! Jo vaig començar llegint fanfiction perquè ja coneixia els personatges, el món on passaven les coses... i després vaig passar a novel·les en anglès.

Researcher: Last question! Do you believe that being part of a fandom gives you more motivation to learn English in the classroom, or not?

Student C: A mi me'n dona molta. Al final, m'interessa poder entendre el que es diu a les meves pel·lícules preferides sense haver de posar els subtítols, que a vegades van molt ràpid, o escoltar música de Taylor Swift i saber de què està parlant.

Student A: Jo, la veritat, és que gràcies a estar en contacte amb les pel·lícules a casa, les sèries i tot allò que m'agrada que està en anglès, he millorat moltíssim. Potser la nota és més o menys la mateixa, però jo noto que les activitats de *reading* són més fàcils.

Student B: També és com si tinguessis un objectiu que va més enllà de la nota que et posa la professora a l'informe, no? Al final, l'anglès és una llengua molt internacional i ens servirà per a molt més que les classes.

Student D: Sí, sí. A vegades les activitats que posen a classe d'anglès són de temes que no m'interessen gens, però veure que puc llegir o escoltar alguna cosa que sí que m'interessa en anglès, doncs és súper xulo!

Researcher: Thank you for your help! We are done!

Students A/B/C/D: Thank you!

Appendix II: Oral Comprehension Field Notes

Note: the name of the students has been eliminated to ensure anonymity. As a result, the only columns available to see are the final oral comprehension level, and all the variables involved to reach that grade (Low / Average / High).

Table 3. Oral comprehension field notes

Oral comprehension level	Basic sentences / basic vocabulary	Everyday sentences / standard vocabulary	Complex sentences / wide range vocabulary	Information repeated?
LOW	YES	NO	NO	3
LOW	YES	NO	NO	3
LOW	YES	NO	NO	3
LOW	YES	NO	NO	3
LOW	YES	NO	NO	3
AVERAGE	YES	YES	NO	1/2
AVERAGE	YES	YES	NO	1/2
HIGH	YES	YES	YES	0
LOW	YES	NO	NO	3
HIGH	YES	YES	YES	0
HIGH	YES	YES	YES	0

AVERAGE	YES	YES	NO	1/2
AVERAGE	YES	YES	NO	1/2
AVERAGE	YES	YES	NO	1/2
LOW	YES	NO	NO	3
LOW	YES	NO	NO	3
LOW	YES	NO	NO	3
HIGH	YES	YES	YES	0
LOW	YES	NO	NO	3
HIGH	YES	YES	YES	0
LOW	YES	NO	NO	3
LOW	YES	NO	NO	3
LOW	YES	NO	NO	3
LOW	YES	NO	NO	3
LOW	YES	NO	NO	3
LOW	YES	NO	NO	3
AVERAGE	YES	YES	NO	1/2
LOW	YES	NO	NO	3
HIGH	YES	YES	YES	0
HIGH	YES	YES	YES	0
HIGH	YES	YES	YES	0

HIGH	YES	YES	YES	0
HIGH	YES	YES	YES	0
HIGH	YES	YES	YES	0
AVERAGE	YES	YES	NO	1/2
HIGH	YES	YES	YES	0
HIGH	YES	YES	YES	0
HIGH	YES	YES	YES	0
HIGH	YES	YES	YES	0
AVERAGE	YES	YES	NO	1/2
HIGH	YES	YES	YES	0
AVERAGE	YES	YES	NO	1/2
LOW	YES	NO	NO	3
LOW	YES	NO	NO	3
LOW	YES	NO	NO	3
AVERAGE	YES	YES	NO	1/2
LOW	YES	NO	NO	3
HIGH	YES	YES	YES	0
LOW	YES	NO	NO	3
AVERAGE	YES	YES	NO	1/2

HIGH	YES	YES	YES	0
LOW	YES	NO	NO	3
HIGH	YES	YES	YES	0
HIGH	YES	YES	YES	0
HIGH	YES	YES	YES	0
LOW	YES	NO	NO	3
LOW	YES	NO	NO	3
AVERAGE	YES	YES	NO	1/2
HIGH	YES	YES	YES	0
LOW	YES	NO	NO	3
LOW	YES	NO	NO	3
AVERAGE	YES	YES	NO	1/2

Appendix III: Reading Comprehension Task

ALICE'S ADVENTURES IN WONDERLAND by Lewis Carroll

Adaptation made by me from: Carroll, L. (2008). Alice's adventures in Wonderland (Oxford Bookworms Library Stage 2). Oxford University Press

CH 1: Down the rabbit-hole

Alice was beginning to get very bored. She and her sister were sitting under the trees. Her sister was reading, but Alice had nothing to do. She looked into her sister's book, but it had no pictures or conversations in it.

"What is the use of a book," thought Alice, "without pictures or conversations?"

It was a hot day, and Alice felt sleepy. Suddenly, a White Rabbit with pink eyes ran past her.

There was nothing really strange about seeing a rabbit. And Alice was not very surprised when the Rabbit said, "Oh dear! Oh dear! I shall be late!"

But then the Rabbit took a watch out of its pocket, looked at it, and kept running.

"I've never seen a rabbit with a pocket or a watch!" she thought. And she ran after the Rabbit. She did not stop to think, and when the Rabbit ran down a large rabbit-hole, Alice followed it and fell into it.

It was a very strange hole. Alice was falling very slowly, and she had time to think and to look around her. She could see nothing below her because it was really dark. But she could see cupboards, books, and pictures on the walls. She could take things out of a cupboard, and put them back in another cupboard.

"Well!" thought Alice. "After a fall like this, I can fall anywhere! I can fall downstairs at home, and I won't cry!"

Suddenly, she stopped falling. She was on the ground. She could see the White Rabbit, who was talking to himself saying: “Oh my ears and whiskers! How late it’s getting!”.

Alice ran after him, but the White Rabbit turned a corner and disappeared. She was now in a long, dark room with many doors, but she could not see the White Rabbit anywhere.

She tried to open the doors, but couldn’t open any of them. Then she saw a little glass table, and on top of it was a very small gold key. Alice took the key and tried again, but the doors were too big, or the key was too small.

Then she saw another door, a very small door. The little gold key unlocked this door, but Alice could not get through, she was too big. So she lay on the floor and looked through the door. She could see a beautiful garden with green trees and bright flowers.

“I want to go there,” she said. “Why can’t I get smaller?”

After a while she went back to the glass table. She put the key down, and saw a little bottle on the table and a piece of paper with the words DRINK ME.

“It can be dangerous to drink out of strange bottles,” she said. But she drank a little bit. Soon she was getting smaller. “I can go through the door now!”

She ran to the door, but she forgot the gold key. It was on top of the table, and now she could not reach it.

Alice sat down on the floor and cried. But after a while she saw a little glass box near her on the floor. She opened it, and found a very small cake with the words EAT ME on it.

“Well, I’ll eat it,” she said. “If I get taller, I can take the key off the table. And if I get smaller, I can get under the door.” Alice ate the cake.

CH 2: The Pool of Tears

“Curiouser and curiouser!” said Alice.

She was getting bigger. “I will be very tall!” she said.

She took the gold key from the table and went to the door, but she could not go through because she was too big. She started to cry and soon there was a big pool of tears around her.

Suddenly she heard a voice, and she stopped crying to listen. “Oh, the Duchess, the Duchess! She’ll be so angry! I’m late, and she’s waiting for me. Oh dear, oh dear!”

It was the White Rabbit! He had white gloves in one hand and a large fan in the other hand.

Alice was afraid, but she needed help. She said, “Oh, please, sir-.” But the White Rabbit ran away.

Alice picked up the fan and the gloves. The room was very hot, so she used the fan. “Everything is strange”, she said. “Am I a different person? Who am I?”

Then she looked at her hand. She was wearing one of the gloves. “I’m getting smaller again!” she thought.

She was now very, very small, the little garden door was locked again, and the little gold key was on the glass table.

“Things are worse now”, thought Alice. Then she fell into the pool of tears. “Oh, why did I cry so much?” said Alice. She swam around and looked for a way out, but the pool was very big.

She saw a mouse and asked “Do you know the way out?”. But the mouse did not answer. Then she tried to ask in French but said: “Where is my cat?” The mouse got angry and swam away.

Alice found her way out of the pool and sat down on the ground. She felt very lonely and unhappy. But after a while, the White Rabbit came looking for his white gloves and his fan.

“The Duchess! The Duchess! Oh my ears and whiskers! She’ll cut my head off, I know she will! Oh, where did I drop my gloves?” Then he saw Alice, asked her to bring him a pair of gloves and a fan and disappeared once again. Alice tried to follow him but she couldn’t. So she sat down under a tree.

CH 3: Conversation with a Caterpillar

“Now,” Alice said to herself. “First, I have to get a little bigger, and second, I have to find that beautiful garden. But how can I do that?”

Alice looked around her, but she could not see anything to eat. Then she saw a large mushroom near her. It was as tall as she was. On top of the mushroom, was a large caterpillar, smoking a pipe. The Caterpillar said, “Who are you?”

“I do not know. I have changed a lot since this morning,” said Alice. “Explain,” answered the Caterpillar.

“I can’t explain,” said Alice, “I’m not the same.”

“I don’t understand,” said the Caterpillar.

“It’s difficult to describe,” Alice replied. “One minute I’m very small, the next minute I’m very tall, then I’m small again.”

“Who are you?” asked the Caterpillar, in a very unfriendly voice.

Alice got angry and walked away, but the Caterpillar shouted “Come back! I have something important to say!” And Alice came back.

“Never get angry,” said the Caterpillar.

“Is that all?” said Alice, trying not to be angry.

“No,” said the Caterpillar. “So how tall do you want to be?”

“A little taller, sir, please,” said Alice. “I’m very small now.”

The Caterpillar said, “One side of the mushroom can make you taller. The other side can make you shorter.”

Alice took two pieces of the mushroom. She ate the first piece and got very tall. Then she ate the other piece and got smaller again.

“That is better,” she said. “Now I can find the beautiful garden.” Alice walked through the wood until she saw a little house.

Appendix IV: Reading Comprehension Exam

About the author: LEWIS CARROLL ⁴

Lewis Carroll (his real name was Charles Lutwidge Dodgson) was born in 1832, and was the third child of a family of eleven children. When he was young, Charles was very good at writing word games and puzzles, and he was also good at Latin and mathematics.. He studied at Rugby School and later at the University of Oxford. He worked as a maths teacher there for many years.

Lewis Carroll wrote books, and he was also a photographer. His most famous book is Alice's Adventures in Wonderland. He first told this story to a girl called Alice Liddell during a boat trip. The book was published in 1865. Later, he wrote another book about Alice called Through the Looking-Glass. He also wrote another nonsense book titled The Hunting of the Snark. The Alice books are very famous and many children like them. They are fun and full of games and poems.

Today, many people read Alice's Adventures in Wonderland. The book has been translated into many languages, and there are plays and films about it. Some expressions from the story are now common. For example, people say "grinning like a Cheshire cat" or "as mad as a hatter". When something strange happens, people sometimes say, "Curiouser and curiouser".

⁴ This text is from the graded reader: Carroll, L. (2008). Alice's adventures in Wonderland (Oxford Bookworms Library Stage 2). Oxford University Press