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Online Fanfiction for Language Teaching and Learning

Fanfiction en ligne pour l'enseignement et l'apprentissage des langues

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Résumés

English Français

Within the digital wilds, online communities, including communities of fans, represent a rich source of inspiration for the development of computer-mediated tasks and activities that can support alternative and creative approaches to language teaching and learning (Sauro, 2014). By its very nature, fanfiction grows out of fans' deep engagement with a television series, book, movie, performer, band, or other source of media. A challenge facing teachers and researchers is incorporating the enthusiasm and innovation inherent within these online spaces into a formal educational context. This presentation introduces recent research on language learning in the digital wilds. This is followed by an overview of research and pedagogical projects that have explored the development and implementation of fanfiction-inspired teaching materials. It then introduces research carried out by the FanTALES project.

À l'intérieur des "digital wilds", les communautés en ligne, y compris les communautés de fans, constituent une source d'inspiration fructueuse pour le développement de tâches et d'activités médiatisées par les technologies permettant de proposer des approches alternatives et créatives de l'enseignement et l'apprentissage des langues (Sauro, 2014). Un éventail de ces pratiques de fans a fait l'objet de recherches dans le domaine de la linguistique appliquée, par exemple sur la lecture ou le visionnement d'anime et de mangas, la conception de sites Internet de fans, le débat et la modération de débats dans des communautés de fans, les traductions de fans, le "spoiling" et la fanfiction (voir Sauro, 2017, pour un aperçu). Cependant, la fanfiction, définie comme une "écriture qui continue, interrompt, réimagine ou simplement parodie des histoires et des personnages sur lesquels d'autres personnes ont déjà écrit" (Jamison, 2013, p. 17) est peut-être la pratique la plus connue et la plus étudiée. De par sa nature même, la fanfiction naît de l'engagement profond des fans envers une série télévisée, un livre, un film, un artiste, un groupe ou toute autre source médiatique et offre un grand potentiel pour susciter le type d'engagement volontaire et soutenu dans la langue cible qui peut favoriser le développement d'une deuxième langue. Un défi auquel sont confrontés les enseignants et



les chercheurs est donc de savoir comment tirer le meilleur parti de l'enthousiasme et de l'innovation inhérents à ces espaces en ligne dans des contextes éducatifs formels.

En conséquence, cet exposé présente plusieurs études de groupes qui ont exploré en classe d'anglais langue étrangère le développement et la mise en œuvre de matériel pédagogique inspiré par la fanfiction, l'une au niveau universitaire et l'autre au niveau de l'enseignement secondaire supérieur. Le premier projet, d'une durée de six ans, a été mené à l'université de Malmö, en Suède, dans le cadre d'un cours obligatoire pour des étudiants se destinant à l'enseignement de l'anglais dans le secondaire. En petits groupes de trois à six, les étudiants ont écrit une fanfiction collaborative sur un texte obligatoire (c'est-à-dire un livre qu'ils pourraient utiliser pour enseigner à leurs futurs élèves). En outre, les étudiants ont rédigé individuellement des documents réflexifs qui leur demandaient d'explorer à la fois les caractéristiques linguistiques et les dispositifs littéraires auxquels ils avaient prêté attention dans leur fanfiction. Le deuxième projet a exploré l'utilisation d'un projet interactif de narration de fanfiction sur plusieurs semaines, mené dans une classe d'anglais de l'enseignement secondaire supérieur en Belgique. Les élèves ont travaillé en petits groupes pour écrire en collaboration leurs histoires qui incorporaient des éléments d'un jeu numérique d'action-aventure bien connu comportant des éléments narratifs. L'analyse des deux projets a mis en évidence un apprentissage de la langue pour les deux populations d'apprenants, notamment le développement du vocabulaire, des compétences rédactionnelles et de la prise de conscience linguistique.

De telles études ont inspiré la création de matériel pédagogique développé par FanTALES, un projet européen qui a réuni des professeurs de langues et des chercheurs de Belgique, d'Allemagne et de Suède. L'exposé se termine par un aperçu de ces matériaux, y compris des incitations à la narration de fanfictions et des rubriques traduites et adaptées pour l'enseignement du néerlandais, de l'anglais, de l'allemand et du suédois, une plate-forme interactive en ligne et un manuel de l'enseignant avec des exemples de leçons et des conseils détaillés sur la mise en œuvre et l'adaptation des matériaux pour différentes langues et populations d'apprenants.

Entrées d'index

Mots-clés : fanfiction

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Rubriques : Points de vue / échanges

Texte intégral

1. Digital wilds, online fandom, and fans

- 1 The digital wilds are "digital spaces, communities and networks [where language learning occurs] that are independent of formal instructional contexts" (Sauro & Zourou, 2019, p. 1).
- 2 Online fandom is one of the different types of communities we see in the digital wilds. It is "the local and international network of fans that develop around a particular program or text or other media product" (Sauro, 2014, p. 239). There are quite a few different kinds of fandom spaces that occur around lots of different types of popular franchises and there can be some debate about what a fan is. The term is not always used in a positive way. The definition that I like is one that is used in the field of fan studies which looks at media response behaviors: "a fan is a person with a relatively deep positive emotional conviction about someone or something famous" (Duffet, 2013, p. 18). We are all familiar with sports fans. It's possible to be a fan of an actor, a performer, musicians, bands, etc. What I'm going to be focusing on here are what are primarily known as media fans, so they would include fans of performers but also fans of books, movies, television shows, and even games, digital games that we see people taking part in.



2. Language learning through fan practices in the digital wilds

- 3 There's been a fair amount of research in the field of applied linguistics that has looked at language learning through fan practices (see Sauro, 2017, for an overview). One of the earliest studies in the field of applied linguistics looked at a young fan who became involved in **developing a fan website**, and through that developed his English proficiency and a new "textual" identity (Lam, 2000, 2006). There's some research that's gone back a while on fans who engage in the **consumption of anime and manga** to develop their Japanese language skills (Fukunaga, 2006; Williams, 2006). Fans are really passionate about the things they like, so they enjoy getting into debates about it, and there's been research that has looked at the language, but also literacy development among fans who are involved in **debating or moderating debates** in online spaces. More recently, there's been a rich outpouring of research, particularly from our colleagues in Spain, who have looked at a variety of **fan-translation practices** and the various different kinds of identities and language learning practices they engage in as they are translating across multiple languages and developing their pluralism.
- 4 Another fan practice is something maybe a lot of people don't think about, but which makes great use of the digital wilds and social media: **spoiling**, where fans gather and share information about the production or plotline of a television show or movie, for example, before it's been released. They try to guess what's going to happen. But the most researched of these fan practices that are used for language learning in the digital wilds is **fanfiction**.

3. Fanfiction

- 5 Fanfiction has a variety of definitions, much like fan does. This is one that I like "it's writing that continues, interrupts, reimagines, or just riffs on stories and characters other people have already written about" (Jamison, 2013, p. 17). There's a transformative element of taking something that exists and making something new or combining several things and elaborating on it, building on the work of others.
- 6 There has been a fair amount of research on fanfiction for language learning in the digital wilds in particular. Here are a few examples. First, a study by Li (2012) who did a case study with a learner named Yin, who was a Hmong refugee to the United States from Thailand and began reading and copying word for word fanfiction because she was involved in drawing fan art. So, Yin was reading for the purpose of drawing, illustrating. Later though, she progressed from not just copying but instead summarizing the stories that she was drawing. Later she began writing her own fanfiction. So, Yin's reading of fanfiction scaffolded her emergent ability to write two very different kinds of texts in English, her second language.
- 7 Another case study is a group case study carried out by Korobkova and Black (2014) on a special community of fans of the band One Direction who were involved in specifically writing fanfiction about this British boy band, not necessarily in one language. Some were using home languages or second languages, but what they all agreed on was that the language skills that they developed through writing fanfiction, even though it was meant to be non-school related, actually transferred to their classroom and their academic writing. For instance, they recognized the development of both vocabulary and grammar knowledge that was transferable, but also the ability to identify and correct their own errors, which is a pretty powerful thing to learn. Many writing teachers work with their students on how to recognize and correct their own writing.



4. Bringing fanfiction into the classroom

- 8 What I saw happening in the digital wilds inspired me to examine what could be done to inspire the same kind of attention and focus in students in the foreign language classroom. What happens when you actually try and bring fanfiction tasks into the classroom? (Sauro & Sundmark, 2016, 2019).

4.1. Creative writing with university advanced English as a foreign language students

- 9 The first study I'm going to examine is a six-year project that brought fanfiction tasks into an advanced English as a foreign language classroom. The context is the English teacher Education program at Malmö University (Sweden). The course was required for all students training to become secondary and upper secondary English teachers. It was offered in their first year in their first semester. We anticipated their level was meant to be around the B2, perhaps to the C1 on the *Common European Framework of Reference* (Council of Europe, 2001), so that they had a pretty advanced level. This course was designed to introduce them to the ideas of teaching literature and creative writing in their future classes. So, we thought bringing fanfiction which required a lot of creative writing, but also elements of literary analysis, seemed to fit within the course, and we wanted to see how successfully it worked and what would happen.
- 10 The class is a first-year class, the course is required, so the group is quite large, something like 70 to 90 students each term, which is a lot when you are looking at writing projects. For this reason, the students were engaged in collaborative fanfiction writing, not individual fanfiction writing, and we were also basing it on a text that they were going to be analyzing in the course, and the text itself was one that they might use in their future teaching, when they went on to teach in secondary or upper secondary schools. The first two years of the project we started with Tolkien's fantasy novel *The Hobbit*. Then we switched the next two years and moved to Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories and had students writing collaborative mystery fanfiction and then, based on overwhelming student feedback, we moved to the Harry Potter texts. I'm going to point out some highlights here, more details are elaborated upon in a recent publication (Sauro & Thorne, 2020), where we talk about some of the challenges we faced and how we continued to adapt the project every year to make it more like the actual fanfiction experiences in the digital wilds.
- 11 I'm going to focus on what happened, what the students perceived that they had learned in this project. As part of the project for six years, students were responsible for two different kinds of writing that they had to do. First was the collaborative fanfiction that they wrote in their groups. We formed groups of students of approximately three to six. We didn't have groups larger than six, and regardless of the task itself, each student was required to write at least 1000 words to contribute to their story. Over the six years we had stories that ranged in length from about 3000 words on the short end to one extremely ambitious group who wrote over 16,000 words.
- 12 In addition to the collaborative writing, students also wrote individual reflection papers that asked them to explore specifically which linguistic features and literary devices they attended to in their fanfiction. We did this both to help them become aware of the choices they were making through fanfiction writing and kind of deepen the learning experience by raising awareness. This also served as a tool for collecting data to see what they identified as having learned, so we could start to document what sort of skills the students seemed to develop when we brought fanfiction into the classroom. I'm going to focus on examples that mainly come from their individual reflections.



- 13 What we saw over all six years, regardless of the text that they created, was common reference to a shift or learning of new vocabulary. These students in Sweden were often very proficient in conversational English, they were very comfortable, we might say, with contemporary English, but in many cases, they were not with literary English. This is what one student who was involved in the Blogging Hobbit explained: "This writing activity has influenced my language skills during this project I've been able to expand my repertoire of English words which are not so commonly used in everyday English anymore" (Sauro & Sundmark, 2016, p. 420). So, for instance, because *The Hobbit*'s story itself is based in a fantasy world, the language doesn't sound like early 21st century youth language, so the students, when they wanted to explain things had to carefully go back to the text and see what words would fit in this universe. One group explained that, in their story, they wanted to talk about a "party" but they realized that the word didn't seem to fit in the text. They went back to see what they could say about a party with drinks and snacks and ended up using words like "feast" instead of "party" and "mead" for a drink or "lembas bread", which is a specific kind of food mentioned in the story. They were using more literary, and unusual not everyday language.
- 14 Another thing that was quite interesting is their language was challenged by a choice that they started making that is very common in the digital wilds, where fans will fuse things together. They'll write a story, but they'll combine it with another story or they'll combine it with something that they know. This is kind of reappropriating it into a known context, and by the time we moved to the Sherlock Holmes stories, we started to see students retelling Sherlock Holmes mysteries and situating them in Sweden. This posed an interesting challenge. Here is an example of one of the stories written: it's called *The Hound of the Northern Lights* and is based on the well-known novel *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, but it is situated in northern Sweden. That meant the very British Holmes and Watson had to deal with life there with the very long nights in winter, having to drink coffee instead of tea and having to negotiate the cultural norms and language while dealing with the Swedish police system. The students had to find a way to reconcile very different discourse styles and see what would happen when you brought these British people into a very different context. Many enjoyed the challenge.
- 15 Fusing stories that have very different languages in them was another type of fusion that was common and posed an additional challenge for students. One very adventurous group wrote a story they called *Nowhere to Hyde*. It was a fusion of Sherlock Holmes with the American 1960s-70s cartoon show Scooby-doo. They reimagined Holmes and Watson as teenagers who were part of the Scooby Gang. A student explained the reason why their group did that: "My interest in Doyle and the Sherlock Holmes world is still at an intermediate level. On the other hand, my knowledge of the Scooby-doo universe is far greater, and I could enter that verse much easier than the universe of Sherlock Holmes" (Student 18, cohort, 2015). They were highly motivated because they got to put something that they knew and liked in the assigned text. The challenge they faced was how to merge or adapt the very Victorian English of Conan Doyle's Holmes and Watson to the very 1970s youth-slang language of the cartoon show. The students realized it was particularly hard to maintain these two universes and mix them together. They had to make very strategic decisions about language. They also recognized they weren't always very successful about it, but they were aware of these very different registers.
- 16 Here is another example of the attention the students paid to the language they used in order to capture the language of the original text so that their story felt like it was a Sherlock Holmes story. This got to the level of phrasing, word order and even the choice of specific words, that again don't reflect the English they were regularly using. A student wrote "instead of saying 'he said' we and Doyle instead used 'said he'" (student 16, cohort 2015). We can see a shifting in the word order. The same student said "that Doyle's Sherlock Holmes often says 'pray' instead of 'please' and 'I fancy' instead of 'I believe' Which we also used in our fanfiction."



- 17 Some students went even beyond this and were aware that once they started using something in their fanfiction, it started to be used outside of the classroom as well. It started to influence their own English. Here's what one student had to say:

First off, I am highly Americanized in my English use and I blame Hollywood. It has been a welcome challenge to write in British. My biggest inspiration has once again been the BBC show... I truly enjoyed using the word "foggiest" in a text, and it's now part of my vocabulary (Sauro & Thorne, 2020, p. 234).

- 18 Many of the students would also look at other versions of Sherlock Holmes to inspire their thinking. All this exposure to British media was introducing them to different slang words that they didn't normally use and were now incorporating into their everyday English.

- 19 We also had students talk about grammar aspects. Here is one that is particularly unique. It only emerged with respect to the Harry Potter stories. A student wrote:

This project made me pay attention to grammatical aspects in the Harry Potter books. For example, JK Rowling doesn't use a lot of transitional words which we just use a lot in academic writing but rather she uses colons. I have never used colons before in my writing, so that was fun to learn (Sauro & Thorne, 2020, p. 236).

- 20 At the level of attending to how to write dialogue or how to write longer sentences, for example, the students became very aware that the norms for this type of writing, this creative writing and this particular author, were very different from what they'd been taught in their academic writing, where they'd been taught how to use conjunctive adverbs and certain very academic sounding transitional phrases like "moreover".

- 21 At university level, and especially in an English teacher education program, you have people who are probably particularly interested in the stories that they're reading and writing and who like learning English. But what happens when you bring fanfiction tasks into a different context (Cornille et al. 2021)? Here is an example at secondary school level.

4.2. Fanfiction from a digital game with secondary school learners

- 22 Let's go to the town of Aalst in Flanders, and look at what happens when we bring fanfiction tasks into the secondary school foreign language classroom. This is work that was recently carried out with my colleagues who are part of the FanTALES Project (see below).

- 23 There were 21 students learning English as a foreign language; they were in upper secondary school (17 to 18 years old), and this was their final year course. Their English level was slightly lower than in the university class from Malmö, most reporting at the B2 level. They were also organized into collaborative writing groups to offer peer support with each other. The groups were smaller, usually two to three students, so there was a total of eight groups in the class. They were not writing fanfiction based on a book; they did it based on a digital game. The teacher worked with the students, and they selected Assassin's Creed as their source text. That's an action-adventure video game that has narrative elements, each version of which features a different time period and region where the story takes place. The teacher made this into a multi week assignment and dedicated approximately 25 classroom hours to this. There's an additional element to the activity that brings in even more of the technology: the students weren't just writing fanfiction; they were putting it in the format of interactive fiction using the software Twine. Interactive storytelling is often a story with a choice; you get to a point and then you go down one path, and the story goes in one direction; if you choose a different path the story has a very different outcome. Twine is the type of application that allows you to put together these branching stories. These are



more complex storytelling activities and some of the classroom time was dedicated to instruction on how to use Twine and put the stories together.

- 24 When we spoke with these secondary school learners, much like the university students, they found it really challenged their vocabulary, and they identified the use of a lot of literary and descriptive vocabulary as being what they learned. One student said: "I think the hard part was being creative and using an extensive vocabulary" (interview 1, participant 4). For many students this was the first time they had done creative writing in any language, so they really had to dive deep for more descriptive words. Many of them commented on the nature of the assignment because it was an extensive, longer one, and affected all their writing skills. One student said: "it improved our writing skills because first, we never wrote such an extensive text and now, we did, and we did it descriptive. So, it improved our writing skills"(interview 1, participant 5). Another quote really gets at how this kind of creative writing was different than what we might think of in a lot of academic writing, in that it required the students to write something they perceived would be interesting to read which meant they really had to think more carefully and adapt their sentence structures:

I think that with the English we had to pay attention to the structures of the sentences. Because it was very tempting to start every sentence with "he...", "He did this...", "He did that..." and continue like that or to just make very short sentences instead of kind of trying to build a decent, beautiful sentence that you would actually read in a book (Fanfiction interview 2, participant 4). (Cornille et al., 2021, p. 33)

- 25 The idea that they were writing fanfiction, something creative but also something that was supposed to be enjoyable to read pushed them to alternate and adapt to create longer sentences and greater sentence varieties. It pushed them at the level of complexity, not just with their vocabulary but also grammar. So, what does this mean for other foreign language classrooms?

4.3. The FanTALES Project: Fan fiction based multilingual interactive storytelling

- 26 The FanTALES Project is a European project that is just completed. It merges practices from fanfiction, interactive fiction, and multilingualism to deliver technology mediated storytelling tasks. It involved colleagues and classes in Belgium, Sweden and Germany. We developed materials, tested them out, received input not just from instructors but also from learners. We started in English, but the materials were also developed in the three other languages of the project, German, Dutch and Swedish. We developed storytelling prompts and rubrics, a teacher handbook that includes sample lessons and more guidance on implementing the materials and an online platform. Teachers can use the platform to assemble digitally all the different prompts and rubrics and pick and mix them together to develop assignments. You can give students access and grade them. You can also share your own materials with others.
- 27 As for the storytelling prompts, the idea was much like the students in Belgium that you could mix the different pieces together. You could mix a fan fiction prompt with an interactive fiction prompt and a multilingualism fiction prompt to make a very complex task. Or you could just have a simple one prompt task. There are about 15 different fanfiction prompts, because there's so many different kinds of—we might say—fanfiction genres.
- 28 Because multilingualism was a part of our project, we also had a chance to mix things up by bringing in examples of how to make the story more multilingual. Here is an example of one that we provide based on if you were to say "use something like Harry Potter": somebody has cursed Harry Potter, he's no longer able to speak English, so to keep young



Harry Potter safe and allow him a normal childhood, Dumbledore sent Hagrid to leave Harry with a Belgian wizard family and Harry therefore never acquired English.

29 Teachers often have concerns about evaluation. So, in addition to the prompts, we have assessment tools. They include checklists, very detailed rubrics but also peer assessment tools, that teachers can adapt for fanfiction, multilingualism, and interactive fiction. Figure 1 shows an example of a teacher's checklist for fanfiction.

Figure 1–Teacher's evaluation checklist and scale.

Teacher's Evaluation Checklist and Scale

Completeness: Is the fanfiction complete or is it a work in progress (WIP)

☐ Complete

☐ Work in progress (WIP)

Fictional Writing: The fanfiction includes characteristics of fictional writing such as plot, setting, character, conflict, dialogue, imaginary events, and point of view to tell a story.

0 1 2 3

Meets Expectations: The fanfiction incorporates all the prompts and meets all the instructions for the assignment.

0 1 2 3

Originality: The fanfiction is sufficiently different from the book, film, digital game or television show it is based upon.

0 1 2 3

Within Universe: The fanfiction captures recognizable aspects of the book, film, digital game or television show it is based upon.

0 1 2 3

Language: The fanfiction accurately captures the language of the book, film, digital game or television show it is based upon.

0 1 2 3

Cohesion: The different parts of the fanfiction fit together well.

0 1 2 3

Complete or Incomplete: _____

Total Score: _____ out of 18

(The FanTALES Group, 2020, p. 2)

30 Another major question that comes up is "What about different levels of learners? Or what about different languages?" So, the handbook includes materials to help people deal with that.

31 We created materials in the four languages of the projects but we found it was really important to find out what students are already or maybe would be interested in the language they are learning. The students are already reading, so we developed surveys for gathering information about potential source texts. These surveys are available in all four languages of the project and they've been adapted for the different languages. For instance, the Swedish survey acknowledges that many Swedes don't play digital games in Swedish, but they may use YouTube and watch YouTube videos and may be interested in YouTube personalities, so that survey looks a little different than the English language one. We also include suggestions for adapting the materials for different levels of proficiency and different learner populations. We also provide different additional classroom teaching ideas to help scaffold. Many students are not very familiar with creative writing at all, and you may have a multi-level class. So which tasks are easier? How do you adapt them? We included such suggestions as well as suggestions for adapting the activities for online teaching.



5. Conclusion

32 Communities of fans, represent a rich source of inspiration for the development of computer-mediated tasks and activities that can support alternative and creative approaches to language teaching and learning. As I have explored in this talk, fanfiction, which has been found to support language learning in the digital wilds, is one such creative approach that can be brought into formal educational classes to support the development of language skills. Collaborations between teachers and researchers and even fans, as exemplified by the FanTALES project, can lead to the creation and of adaptation of teaching and assessment materials that can help teachers integrate fanfiction and other related practices from the digital wilds into their classrooms.

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Table des illustrations

	Titre	Figure 1—Teacher's evaluation checklist and scale.
	Légende	(The FanTALES Group, 2020, p. 2)
	URL	http://journals.openedition.org/alsic/docannexe/image/5763/img-1.png
	Fichier	image/png, 74k

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