Increasing English Language Writing Fluency With Fanfiction
by Katie Mitchell

Do your students love Sherlock Holmes, Harry Potter, or *The Lord of the Rings*? You can incorporate these popular characters into your classes using fanfiction. Fanfiction has been defined as "writing that continues, interrupts, reimagines, or just riffs on stories and characters other people have already written" or produced (Jamison, 2013, p. 17). Students can create fanfiction based on novels, short stories, movies, or television shows. While writing fanfiction, students analyze characters and remix them for their own creative work.

The Benefits

Fanfiction is at its core task-based learning built on "problem solving and play" (Sauro, 2014, p. 240). Because they use source material as inspiration for writing, fanfiction assignments motivate students to read and listen more closely. Fanfiction also encourages students to think critically because they need to make inferences about characters' values, objectives, and actions in order to place those characters in settings and storylines of their own invention. The writing task changes how students interact with the source material and improves their receptive skills.

This creative task also benefits students' productive skills. Creative writing is playful and encourages students to experiment with language; this language play can aid in language learning and fluency (Cook, 2000). In this playful genre, teachers can still focus students' attention on vocabulary and grammar, but it is inherently lower stakes, more creative, and less formal than other kinds of writing. Finally, fanfiction writing is meant to be shared. It's fun. Together, this playfulness, practice, and motivation can encourage writing development.

Applications

Changing the Medium: Fanfiction can take many forms. It can be as simple as changing the medium of the work. For example, students can reimagine a traditional story as a comic book using an online tool, such as the one provided by MakeBeliefsComix.com. This task involves reinterpreting the characters, setting, and plot without making substantial changes. See an example comic book assignment from my class here.

Bending the Characters: Other fanfiction activities can involve changing the story itself. Students can experiment with self-insert fanfiction, in which they place themselves in the story, reimaging themselves as one of the main characters. They can also experiment with issues of diversity and inclusion by changing the gender, nationality, or religion of the

characters. In fanfiction, this is called "bending" characters and is a popular practice online (Thomas & Stornaiuolo, 2016). These changes to the characters' identities can have ripple effects on the relationships and on the actual outcome of the story. Read this example of a gender and race-bent Harry Potter by an Arab female author on Fanfiction.net. In it, Harry Potter is an Arab girl named Amira Potter.

Creating New Story Elements: Other types of fanfiction might deviate even more from the original work; writers might create a new ending or use known characters in an entirely new storyline or setting. For instance, students might imagine the next time two characters meet and how they might interact. In these cases, students are applying what they know about the characters' personalities to new situations. The results can be wonderfully creative. Explore an English language student's continuation of a Sherlock Holmes story here.

Example Fanfiction Project

In an upper intermediate reading class, students can create a choose-your-own-adventure version of a novel they are reading. Unlike traditional novels, choose-your-own-adventure stories (CYOA) aren't linear. Instead, they invite the reader to make decisions that affect the characters and plot. This CYOA writing project can be done over 5 weeks.

Before starting, you should identify two to four points in your source novel where the story could have taken a different turn. The following example uses *The Giver* by Lois Lowry. In this dystopian novel, a young boy is assigned to be the new keeper of the community's memories. For the CYOA, students summarize the story and imagine alternative paths where, for instance, the main character might be assigned a different job or given different types of memories. They also write alternative endings. Developing these alternative paths alongside the summary encourages students to deeply analyze the plot, characters, and setting.

> **Week 1**
> Students are put into groups of four. They have read the first few chapters of the novel. They write a summary of the beginning of the book that can serve as the first section of their CYOA. They also work on the first decision point at which the reader will choose the direction of the story. With students' CYOA versions of *The Giver*, the first choice is to decide on the main character's job. Specifically, they summarize the actual job the main character was assigned and write a few paragraphs imagining different versions in which the assignment was changed.

> **Week 2–3**
> Groups continue to summarize parts of the book and to create new alternative paths. You can decide what these alternative paths might be by assigning specific writing prompts or allowing groups to select these themselves. These paths allow the CYOA writers to choose what will happen next. The students' CYOAs may also include alternative endings. Many of these alternative paths ended quickly with hilarity and absurdity.

> **Week 4**
> Students have finished reading the novel and writing the first draft of their CYOAs. They publish their CYOA story on a page-building site, such as Google Sites, where each page contains part of the story and ends by asking the reader to choose what should happen next. Then, students read through their CYOA. Each group member

has a different editing task (vocabulary, grammar, coherence, style), and they work to improve their CYOA.

Week 5
Students share their CYOAs with their classmates. They laugh as they experience surprise and adventure at every turn. They compare the different outcomes in the CYOAs and discuss which one they like the best. See an example student-created CYOA of *The Giver* here.

Conclusion

Fanfiction encourages active reading and listening by changing the student's role from consumer to producer. These fanfiction tasks can be incorporated into many different classes or become an entire course. I recently taught a fanfiction elective at my university based on the Sherlock Holmes canon. Whatever form fanfiction takes in your class, it has the potential to engage students while increasing their reading, listening, writing, and digital literacy skills.

References

Cook, G. (2000). *Language play, language learning*. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.

Jamison, A. (2013). Why fic? In A. Jamison (Ed.), *Fic: Why fan fiction is taking over the world* (pp. 17–24). Dallas, TX: Smart Pop Books.

Sauro, S. (2014). Lessons from the fandom: Task models for technology-enhanced language learning. In M. González-Lloret & L. Ortega (Eds.), *Technology-mediated TBLT: Researching technology and tasks* (pp. 239–262). Amsterdam, Netherlands: John Benjamins.

Thomas, E. E., & Stornaiuolo, A. (2016). Restorying the self: Bending toward textual justice. *Harvard Educational Review*, *86*(3), 313–338.

Katie Mitchell *has taught in Albania, Germany, Thailand, and the United States. She earned her master's in TESOL from Portland State University. She is interested in curriculum development, computer-assisted language learning, writing instruction, game-based learning, and English for specific purposes. Katie has presented internationally on these topics and has worked on large-scale curriculum projects, including an online business English product and an Xbox game.*