Exploring EFL Students' Engagement and Learning Outcomes through AO3 Fanfiction: A Descriptive Study at SMAN 1 Tenggarong

Aji Evita Hanifa
2111102421007@umkt.ac.id

Khusnul Khatimah
kk645@umkt.ac.id

Ade Ismail Ramadhan Hamid
air550@umkt.ac.id

Universitas Muhammadiyah Kalimantan Timur

ABSTRACT

This study explores the influence of reading fanfiction on the Archive of Our Own (AO3) platform on students' engagement with English narrative texts and the perceived learning benefits for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. Conducted at SMAN 1 Tenggarong, East Kalimantan, the study involved 38 high school students who actively engage with fanfiction on AO3. Using a quantitative approach, data were collected through a 14-item online questionnaire and analyzed using SPSS version 26 for reliability, validity, and descriptive statistics. The findings reveal that students showed high motivation when reading content that matched their interests (M = 4.29, SD = 0.93) and reported a preference for fanfiction over textbooks (M = 3.32). Students said they enjoyed reading (M = 3.03), relevance of content (M = 3.18), and platform usability (M = 3.26) as moderate. Regarding learning outcomes, students perceived notable benefits in vocabulary development (M = 3.40) and interest in reading English (M = 3.42), while grammar exposure (M = 3.11) and confidence in reading (M = 3.08) received moderate ratings. Gender-based analysis showed that male students had slightly higher engagement, while female students reported greater gains in vocabulary and interest. These results suggest that AO3 fanfiction serves as an engaging and effective supplementary tool for EFL learners, particularly in fostering vocabulary growth, reading motivation, and reader autonomy. While it may not fully replace structured grammar instruction, its personalized and enjoyable content can enhance student interaction with English texts and promote a more meaningful reading experience in digital environments.
Keywords: Fanfiction; AO3; Reading Comprehension; Student Engagement

INTRODUCTION

One of the essential components of education is reading. As Muijselaar et al. (2018) assert, reading plays a fundamental role in supporting students' learning development. Similarly, Fauriza (2023) explains that students must comprehend what they read to meaningfully engage with and benefit from educational content. Reading comprehension refers to the ability to process, understand, and interpret written texts. It includes skills such as inferring meaning from context, summarizing key points, analyzing content, and drawing logical conclusions. It also involves connecting facts, interpreting clues, and exercising critical thinking where one questions, analyzes, interprets, and evaluates information. These skills are indispensable for academic achievement because they empower learners to absorb, critique, and apply knowledge. Thus, reading comprehension and critical thinking together form the foundation for meaningful learning and problem solving.

In today's digital era, reading habits are shifting from traditional print-based formats—such as books, newspapers, and magazines toward digital or online platforms. Among these digital trends, fanfiction has emerged as a widely consumed genre, particularly among younger readers. Fanfiction refers to original stories written by fans based on characters, settings, or plots from existing fictional works. As Thomas (2011) describes, fanfiction reimagines canonical elements from one or more fictional universes, allowing readers to explore familiar narratives in new and often unconventional ways.

Fanfiction's popularity is evidenced by the high engagement levels and wide dissemination of fan-written stories across online platforms. Abdulrahman et al. (2020) found that many readers are motivated to engage with English language fanfiction out of admiration for their favorite characters or idols. This intrinsic motivation contributes to improved reading engagement. Aprilia et al. (2020) affirm that student interest is a significant factor in reading comprehension because it encourages readers to interact more deeply with the text and pursue their reading goals with greater enthusiasm. Consequently, students are more likely to read when they encounter texts that align with their interests reducing feelings of boredom and cognitive fatigue during reading tasks (Fauriza, 2023).

A key platform that supports the fanfiction phenomenon is AO3 (Archive of Our Own), a non-profit, user-generated archive for fan-written stories. According to Boyd (2020), AO3 is one of the most widely used fanfiction platforms in the Western world, hosting over seven million works and three million users as of 2020. Designed by fans for fans, AO3 emphasizes inclusivity, freedom of expression, and detailed tagging systems, making it an ideal resource for exploring English texts in diverse genres. Fauriza (2023) suggests that AO3 can serve as a learning tool that helps students improve their narrative comprehension in an engaging and interactive way.

There is still a significant lack of research on how reading fanfiction specifically improves critical reading skills like inference, analysis, and evaluation, despite earlier studies highlighting the motivational role of fanfiction in promoting reading engagement (Abdulrahman et al., 2020; Aprilia et al., 2020) and recognizing platforms like AO3 as useful tools for improving narrative comprehension (Fauriza, 2023). The majority of studies concentrate on students' interest, enjoyment, or overall fanfiction engagement, but they frequently don't thoroughly examine the cognitive processes at play, such as how students comprehend intricate plots, assess character motivations, or analyze specific plot points in fanfiction.

Furthermore, there is frequently the lack of empirical evidence in earlier studies regarding the ways in which digital fanfiction platforms enhance quantifiable gains in critical thinking and reading comprehension in school settings. Additionally, little attention is paid to how students' active involvement in fan communities whether through writing, reviewing, or commenting may support their thoughtful and interpretative reading habits. By examining the precise ways that reading fanfiction on websites like AO3 may aid students in developing their reading comprehension and critical thinking abilities, especially in EFL or ESL contexts, this study seeks to close these gaps.

Despite the increasing popularity of digital fiction platforms like AO3, limited research has been conducted on their educational impact, especially in the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners in Indonesia. In particular, the East Kalimantan region including Tenggarong has seen minimal exploration into how digital reading materials, such as fanfiction, can influence students' comprehension and engagement with English texts. Given the increasing technological literacy and growing interest in fan-driven content among teenagers, there is a need to better understand how platforms like AO3 contribute to language learning. Digital fiction sites offer authentic, interest-driven exposure to the English language, providing a rich context for language acquisition. However, academic research has not kept pace with these developments, especially regarding how digital platforms support English reading, writing, and vocabulary development. Insights from such research can inform the development of contextualized and digitally integrated EFL teaching practices.

In the case of SMAN 1 Tenggarong, this study holds particular relevance. By examining students' interaction with AO3 fanfiction, educators can Teachers should use more efficient teaching techniques that take into account students' changing demands and digital habits in order to improve EFL learning outcomes. Students' preferences for digital reading platforms can be accommodated and current trends can be adjusted with the aid of technology integration in the curriculum. Learners are able to interact with the content more thoroughly when critical thinking is promoted through reflection and debate of digital texts. Furthermore, offering more interesting, student-focused reading materials might improve comprehension and motivation. To guarantee that students can successfully navigate and comprehend online reading environments, it is also

crucial to address particular difficulties associated with comprehending digital texts. This study aims to investigate the extent to which reading AO3 fanfiction influences student engagement with English narrative texts and explore students' perceptions regarding the learning benefits of reading AO3 fanfiction in the context of English as a Foreign Language.
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LITERATURE REVIEW

Fan-made tales frequently take the existing story world in new and sometimes unexpected directions. Fanfiction, commonly abbreviated as *fanfic*, refers to stories created by fans based on plot lines and characters from either a single source text or a "canon" of works. According to Thomas (2011), writing stories based on one or more source texts has long been the most common way for fans to express and concretize their love for a certain fictional universe, although fan activity can take many other shapes.

The Value of Reading

Reading is a vital skill that enables individuals to access information, acquire knowledge, and develop critical thinking. As noted by Pradani (2021), reading is both a mental and physical activity that enhances vocabulary, reduces stress, and stimulates the mind. Furthermore, reading allows readers to comprehend and apply information in future contexts, broadening their perspectives and deepening intellectual engagement.

The Fanfiction Concept

Fanfiction is a form of creative writing based on existing fictional works or characters. It allows amateur writers often fans of a particular franchise to explore alternative narratives, add new characters, or expand upon untold elements of the original story (Nornoi, 2022). Fanfiction, or fanfic, is a fictional narrative derived from existing fictional works, historical figures, or celebrities. These narratives are typically shared online by amateur authors. Fanfiction can vary in length and complexity, from short paragraphs to multi-volume sagas. Writers incorporate pre-existing elements such as characters, setting, and plot points, sometimes even mimicking the original author's writing style (Nornoi, 2022). Fanfiction encompasses a variety of genres and subgenres:

- Alternate Universe (AU): Reimagines familiar characters in a different setting (e.g., high school, office).
- Crossover Fanfiction: Blends characters or settings from different fictional universes (e.g., Elsa from *Frozen* and Jack Frost from *Rise of the Guardians*). A modern subgenre includes reaction-based fanfics where characters from one universe watch or react to another franchise, such as *My Hero Academia* characters watching *Marvel* films (Nornoi, 2022).

Fanfiction supports both emotional engagement and skill development. Readers who are emotionally invested in a story can continue engaging with its characters through fan-written works. Sauro (2014) emphasizes that fanfiction is a form of task-based learning rooted in problem-solving and playful creativity. Reading and writing fanfiction encourages deeper engagement with source texts, enhances critical thinking, and fosters inferencing skills. By imagining characters in new situations, students infer motivations and behaviors, thus developing a nuanced understanding of the narrative. Moreover, writing fanfiction fosters creativity and language fluency. Cook (2000) argues that imaginative writing allows for experimentation with language in a low-stakes, enjoyable context. Though informal, it still supports vocabulary development and syntactic awareness. As Nornoi (2022) notes, the act of sharing fanfiction also enhances motivation, as it combines purpose, creativity, and peer feedback.

AO3 (Archive of Our Own): Platform Overview

Archive of Our Own (AO3) is a widely used fanfiction repository known for its sophisticated tagging system and comprehensive metadata structure. According to Silberstein-Bamford (2024), AO3 enables users to tag stories based on rating, content warnings, fandoms, character relationships, and additional descriptors, such as genre, trope, and temporal setting. These features not only organize content effectively but also empower readers to locate stories that align with their specific interests. The platform supports community interaction, provides content warnings for safe browsing, and encourages exploration across genres and fandoms. This functionality makes AO3 an effective and inclusive space for developing reading engagement, especially among digital-native youth

Students' Engagement in Reading Activities

Student engagement is a key factor influencing the success of reading comprehension and overall academic performance. Engagement in reading can be defined as the emotional, cognitive, and behavioral involvement of students while interacting with texts (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000). Highly engaged readers are not only motivated to read but also demonstrate sustained attention, persistence, and a willingness to explore complex ideas. They are likely to seek out additional reading materials, connect texts to personal experiences, and reflect on what they have read. According to Fredricks, Blumenfeld, and Paris (2004), engagement encompasses three dimensions:

- Behavioral engagement (participation in reading tasks),
- Emotional engagement (interest and enjoyment), and
- Cognitive engagement (mental investment in learning strategies and critical thinking).

Digital reading platforms like AO3 can enhance engagement by offering customizable, interest-driven content. Unlike textbooks, fanfiction allows students to explore themes, characters, and genres that are personally meaningful. Research

by Huang et al. (2015) found that digital environments with interactive features significantly increased engagement, particularly among students who were otherwise disinterested in traditional reading materials.

In the context of EFL, engagement with English texts is crucial as it directly affects the amount of language input and exposure a learner receives. Motivation, personal relevance, and ease of access are often cited as predictors of reading engagement in second language learning (Day & Bamford, 2002).

Learning Benefits of Reading Fanfiction for EFL Students

Reading, especially in a foreign language, has long been associated with vocabulary growth, improved comprehension, and increased language awareness. Extensive reading reading large amounts of material for general understanding is considered a core strategy in language acquisition (Nation, 2001). Fanfiction, as a form of extensive and interest-driven reading, provides a unique context for EFL students to practice reading in a more informal and authentic manner.

Several studies have highlighted the benefits of fanfiction for language learners:

- Vocabulary Acquisition: Repeated exposure to language in meaningful contexts aids in incidental vocabulary learning (Chen & Chen, 2014).
- Grammar Awareness: While not explicitly instructional, fanfiction often mirrors natural sentence structures and dialogue.
- Reading Confidence: Engaging with accessible and relatable texts can reduce anxiety and increase students' confidence in reading English (Sauro, 2014).
- Critical Thinking: When students interpret and evaluate characters, plots, or fan-written alternatives, they engage in higher-order thinking.

Previous Related Study

Digital reading has conflicting consequences on learning outcomes, engagement, and comprehension, according to research. According to Mangen, Walgermo, and Brønnick (2013), students who read linear texts on paper outperformed those who read them digitally on comprehension tests, indicating that print may improve mental mapping and recall. In a similar vein, Singer and Alexander (2017) found that although students thought they understood digital texts better, they really understood print texts better. This suggests that students may have overestimated their reading comprehension and processed information superficially when using screens. Digital tools, on the other hand, can promote motivation, especially for students who struggle. Huang et al. (2015) showed that digital settings with a lot of multimedia enhanced engagement, especially among low-performing readers. Jeong (2012) pointed out that e-books and print books had similar comprehension levels, but that using screens caused more eye strain, highlighting the physical disadvantages. While Liu (2005) warned that digital environments frequently encourage skimming rather than deep reading, highlighting the need for strategy instruction, Chen and Chen (2014) discovered that mobile reading apps with interactive features (such as dictionary support) improved vocabulary retention and

comprehension in EFL/ESL contexts. These findings collectively imply that although digital reading has interactive and motivational advantages, its efficacy is contingent upon context, design, and learner training to minimize cognitive and physical trade-offs.

METHOD

Design and Samples

This study employed a quantitative research design utilizing an online questionnaire to collect data from students at SMAN 1 Tenggarong who actively use the AO3 (Archive of Our Own) website as part of their reading habits. A total of 38 high school students voluntarily participated in the study. These participants were drawn from SMAN 1 Tenggarong, a public senior high school located at Mulawarman Street RT.03, Sukarame, Tenggarong Subdistrict, Kutai Kartanegara Regency, East Kalimantan 75541, Indonesia. The selection of this school was based on the accessibility of respondents who are familiar with digital reading platforms and have exposure to fanfiction content, particularly through AO3. The use of a structured online questionnaire allowed for efficient data gathering on students' perceptions, reading behaviors, and engagement with fanfiction texts in a measurable and replicable manner.

Instrument and Procedure

A questionnaire was the instrument used to collect the data. Students were given the questionnaire and answered the questions. Fourteen multiple-choice questions were included, with the options: 1 (disagree), 2 (strongly disagree), 3 (neutral), 4 (agree), and 5 (strongly agree). The participants received the online questionnaires via email using Google Forms. The most expensive appears to be an online survey distributed via social media. Efficient. When it was suitable, they were able to respond to the questionnaire. After 38 responses were received or the allotted time had passed, the questionnaire was closed. The researcher employed quantitative methods in the data collection process, specifically through the use of tests to measure reliability and validity. To analyze the results, SPSS version 26 was utilized as the primary statistical tool. This software enabled the researcher to evaluate both the reliability and validity of the research instrument to ensure the accuracy and consistency of the data collected.

Data Analysis

With the use of SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) version 26, descriptive quantitative analysis was used to analyze the data in this study. The analysis's primary goals were to investigate the perceived educational advantages of AO3 fanfiction reading activities and the impact that it has on EFL students' interaction with English narrative texts. Each of the 14 Likert-scale items on the

survey was graded from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Several steps were involved in the analysis:

Data Cleaning and Validation: Every response was examined to make sure it was accurate and consistent. There was no missing data that needed to be imputationed because all 38 participants provided complete answers. Reliability Testing: To evaluate the questionnaire's internal consistency, Cronbach's Alpha was calculated. Indicating that the items accurately measured the target constructs of engagement and learning outcomes, a reliability value of $\alpha > 0.7$ was deemed satisfactory. Descriptive Statistical Analysis: To ascertain the broad trends of students' answers, the mean and standard deviation were computed for every item. Levels of motivation, enjoyment, content relevance, usability, vocabulary acquisition, grammar awareness, reading interest, and confidence were all interpreted using these descriptive statistics. Gender-Based Analysis: The mean ratings of male and female participants were compared across a few key variables in order to find any possible gender-based disparities in perceptions and involvement. This investigation shed light on the potential effects of gender on students' levels of involvement and the educational advantages of AO3 fanfiction.

RESULT AND DISUSSION

This chapter presents the findings of the research in the form of descriptive statistics and provides a discussion aligned with the research objectives. The analysis is based on the questionnaire responses of 38 EFL students and is aimed at answering the following research questions: (1) How does reading AO3 fanfiction influence students' engagement with English narrative texts? and (2) What are the perceived learning benefits of AO3 fanfiction for EFL students?

Students' Engagement with English Narrative Texts through AO3 Fanfiction

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Students' Engagement with AO3 Fanfiction

Variable	Mean (Overall)	Std. Dev	Interpretation
VAR00003	04.29	0,064583	Very high motivation to read when content is interesting
VAR00005	03.32	0,064583	Students generally prefer fanfiction slightly more than textbooks
VAR00006	03.03	01.01	Reading on AO3 is moderately enjoyable
VAR00007	03.18	01.00	AO3 content is somewhat relevant to student interests
VAR00008	03.26	01.05	AO3 is relatively easy to use

VAR00009	03.18	01.02	Students feel moderately more engaged when reading via AO3

To explore how AO3 fanfiction influences students' engagement, descriptive statistics were obtained for several items measuring motivation, enjoyment, relevance, and platform usability. The highest engagement was reflected in the item "I feel motivated to read when the topic or characters are interesting" (M = 4.29, SD = 0.93), indicating that narrative interest strongly motivates students to read. This suggests that the content available on AO3—which is often written by fans and for fans—resonates well with student preferences. Other indicators of engagement include preference for fanfiction over textbooks (M = 3.32), enjoyment of the AO3 reading experience (M = 3.03), the relevance of AO3 stories to personal interests (M = 3.18), and ease of navigating the platform (M = 3.26). The level of engagement while reading on AO3 (M = 3.18) suggests that while the platform does enhance engagement, it does so moderately. Overall, AO3 facilitates meaningful engagement through content personalization and ease of access.

Perceived Learning Benefits of AO3 Fanfiction for EFL Students

Table 2 Descriptive Analysis of EFL Students' Perceived Learning Outcomes from Reading AO3 Fanfiction

Variable	Mean (Overall)	Std. Dev	Interpretation
VAR00010	03.40	01.17	Moderate vocabulary improvement
VAR00011	03.42	01.22	AO3 increases interest in English reading
VAR00012	03.11	0,058333	Slight grammar exposure benefit
VAR00013	03.08	0,050694	Slight confidence improvement

In assessing learning outcomes, four items were analyzed: vocabulary development, grammar exposure, reading interest, and confidence. The results showed that students perceived notable benefits, especially in vocabulary improvement (M = 3.40, SD = 1.17) and increased interest in reading English (M = 3.42, SD = 1.22). These findings highlight the lexical richness of fanfiction and its role in stimulating students' desire to read. Exposure to grammar and sentence structures (M = 3.11) and increased confidence in reading English narrative texts (M = 3.08) were rated as moderately beneficial. This suggests that while AO3 contributes to language input, it might not substitute formal instruction in grammar or structure.

Gender-Based Descriptive Analysis

Table 3. Gender-Based Comparison of Engagement and Learning Perceptions toward AO3 Fanfiction

Variable	Female Mean	Male Mean	Notable Differences
VAR00003	04.19	04.41	Males slightly more motivated
VAR00005	03.14	03.53	Males prefer fanfiction more
VAR00006	0,1326389	03.41	Males enjoy AO3 more
VAR00010	03.48	03.35	Females slightly more vocabulary gain
VAR00011	03.48	03.35	Females report higher interest gain

Further analysis by gender revealed subtle differences in engagement and learning perceptions. Male students reported slightly higher levels of engagement across variables such as enjoyment (M = 3.41) and preference for fanfiction (M = 3.53), while female students reported slightly higher learning benefits, especially in vocabulary gain (M = 3.48) and reading interest (M = 3.48). These findings indicate that both male and female students benefit from AO3, though the aspects they find most impactful may differ slightly. Such differences can inform differentiated instruction or platform integration strategies tailored to diverse learner profiles.

The findings of this study demonstrate that AO3 fanfiction plays a meaningful role in enhancing both student engagement and learning outcomes in an EFL context. The high score for engagement when topics are interesting supports the theory that intrinsic motivation is key to reading engagement (Day & Bamford, 2002). AO3's user-driven content and customizable reading experience (tags, filters, genres) make it more accessible and appealing compared to static textbook narratives. On the learning side, the most significant benefit reported was vocabulary acquisition, which aligns with Chen and Chen (2014) discovered that mobile reading apps with interactive features) improved vocabulary retention and comprehension in EFL/ESL contexts. In summary, reading AO3 fanfiction supports EFL learners' engagement and offers beneficial learning opportunities, particularly in vocabulary growth and reading confidence. This highlights the potential of integrating curated online fanfiction texts as supplementary material in English language education.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to explore the influence of reading AO3 fanfiction on students' engagement with English narrative texts and to identify the perceived learning benefits of such digital reading among EFL learners at SMAN 1 Tenggarong. The findings suggest that AO3, as a user-generated fanfiction platform, offers valuable contributions to students' reading motivation and vocabulary development in an EFL context. First, in terms of engagement, the study found that students were highly motivated to read when the stories aligned with their personal interests,

particularly when the characters or themes were familiar and enjoyable. AO3's customizable and interactive features such as tagging, genre selection, and author diversity allow students to engage more deeply with the content compared to conventional academic texts. While overall engagement levels were moderate, the personalization of content was a key factor in sustaining students' interest. Second, with regard to learning benefits, students reported positive impacts on vocabulary acquisition and increased interest in reading English texts. These outcomes highlight the role of AO3 in providing authentic, context-rich language input, which can contribute to incidental vocabulary learning and build reading confidence. However, the perceived benefits in areas such as grammar exposure and structural understanding were moderate, suggesting that while AO3 can serve as an effective supplementary tool, it does not replace structured grammar instruction.

Gender-based analysis revealed slight variations in preferences and perceived benefits, with male students showing higher engagement and female students reporting slightly greater perceived gains in vocabulary and reading interest. These findings underscore the importance of personalized and differentiated approaches in integrating digital reading into EFL instruction. Overall, the study concludes that AO3 fanfiction can serve as a meaningful and engaging supplement to traditional English reading materials. By bridging students' personal interests with language learning objectives, AO3 promotes reading motivation and supports lexical development in a way that is relevant to the digital habits of modern learners. Therefore, incorporating digital fanfiction platforms into EFL curricula alongside formal instruction has the potential to enhance reading comprehension, support autonomous learning, and cultivate a lifelong reading culture among students. Future research could examine the long-term impacts of reading fanfiction on students' general language ability, including their writing and grammar abilities, in light of the findings. Researchers may also look at how learners' critical thinking and language use are affected by active participation, such as creating fanfiction or participating in online forums. Furthermore, research that compare various fanfiction platforms or digital reading materials may provide further information about how well they work in different learning environments.

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