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Teaching Writing through Fan Fiction: A Case Study of EFL Undergraduate Students at Uzhhorod National University

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Abstract

The article examines the effectiveness of teaching writing through fan fiction in an EFL university context. The study aims to investigate the pedagogical potential of fan fiction as a tool for improving students' writing skills in textual organization, linguistic competence, and creative expression. The study's significance lies in addressing the gap between traditional academic writing instruction and contemporary participatory digital literacy practices by exploring fan fiction as a learner-centered approach to EFL writing pedagogy. The study employs a mixed-methods quasi-experimental design involving 48 undergraduate Philology students at Uzhhorod National University. Participants were divided into an experimental group engaged in fan fiction-based writing activities and a control group following a traditional academic writing syllabus. Data collection included pre- and post-test writing tasks, questionnaires, interviews, and classroom observations. Quantitative data were analyzed using paired t-tests and mean score comparisons. The results demonstrated statistically significant improvement in the experimental group ($t = 9.84$, $p < 0.001$), with a large effect size ($d = 1.21$), particularly in content development, coherence,

creativity, and learner engagement. The findings suggest that fan fiction-based instruction enhances writing performance by fostering motivation, reducing writing anxiety, and supporting narrative competence and collaborative learning. The study confirms that fan fiction can function as an effective pedagogical resource in EFL writing instruction. However, the findings are limited by the relatively small sample size, single-university context, and short duration of the intervention.

Keywords: creativity, EFL writing, Fan Fiction, learner engagement, narrative competence, writing instruction

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Introduction

The rapid transformation of digital communication and literacy practices has significantly reshaped how writing is taught in contemporary education. In particular, participatory culture and user-generated content have created new opportunities to engage learners in meaningful, authentic writing activities. Among these practices, fan fiction has emerged as a dynamic and pedagogically valuable form of creative expression, allowing learners to interact with existing narratives while developing their own voices. As scholars note, fan fiction communities function as collaborative environments where individuals actively produce, negotiate, and reinterpret texts, contributing to linguistic development and identity construction (Samutina, 2017).

At the same time, advances in educational technologies, including artificial intelligence, have transformed writing instruction by enabling new forms of scaffolding, feedback, and content generation (Crompton & Burke, 2023). Despite growing scholarly interest in fan fiction and digital writing practices, insufficient attention has been paid to empirically investigating fan fiction as a structured pedagogical tool for improving students' writing skills in EFL higher education contexts. Existing studies primarily treat fan fiction as a cultural or participatory phenomenon, while its direct impact on writing development remains underexplored.

The research question guiding this study is whether integrating fan fiction into writing instruction improves students' writing skills.

The objectives of the study are: to analyze theoretical approaches to fan fiction as a form of digital and participatory discourse; to examine the linguistic and stylistic features of fan fiction relevant to writing instruction; to identify pedagogical strategies for integrating fan fiction into writing instruction; and to evaluate the impact of fan fiction-based activities on students' writing development and engagement.

The aim of the study is to investigate the pedagogical potential of fan fiction as a tool for improving students' writing skills in EFL educational contexts.

The significance of the study lies in addressing the gap between conventional writing instruction and evolving digital literacy practices. While traditional academic writing instruction often emphasizes formal conventions and rigid structures, fan fiction encourages creativity,

intertextuality, and emotional engagement, which may enhance learners' motivation and support the development of narrative and stylistic competence. Furthermore, integrating fan fiction into writing pedagogy corresponds to contemporary learner-centered approaches that promote authentic communication and active participation in the learning process.

Literature Review

Recent scholarship on writing pedagogy increasingly emphasizes participatory literacy practices, collaborative meaning-making, and digitally mediated communication. In this context, fan fiction has attracted scholarly attention not only as a cultural phenomenon but also as a potentially effective pedagogical resource for developing writing competence in EFL settings. Existing research shows that fan fiction intersects with several key dimensions of contemporary writing instruction, including participatory literacy, narrative scaffolding, affective engagement, and technology-enhanced learning.

One of the central themes in current research concerns participatory literacy and collaborative writing practices. Fan fiction communities are often described as interactive environments where readers and writers co-construct narratives, negotiate interpretations, and engage in socially situated meaning-making (Hills, 2008; Weitin & Werber, 2023). Unlike traditional models of writing instruction that position students primarily as individual producers of texts, participatory writing environments foster dialogue, peer feedback, and shared authorship. These practices align with learner-centered approaches in contemporary writing pedagogy, which emphasize authentic communication and active engagement in discourse communities (Ferris & Hedgcock, 2023; Hyland, 2024). Research on collaborative online writing similarly shows that interaction and peer-supported composition positively contribute to learners' writing development, particularly in coherence, fluency, and textual organization (George & Sharma, 2026). In this respect, fan fiction can be viewed as a naturally collaborative literacy practice that reflects real communicative experiences in digital culture.

Another important area of research concerns narrative scaffolding and the pedagogical affordances of fan fiction. Scholars note that fan fiction allows learners to work within familiar fictional universes and pre-existing narrative structures, thereby reducing the cognitive load of generating entirely new contexts and characters (Knight, 2016). This familiarity enables students to focus more directly on language use, stylistic experimentation, and textual organization. Studies of fan fiction discourse also reveal recurring narrative and linguistic patterns that support genre awareness and discourse competence (Donaldson & Pope, 2022). Furthermore, transforming canonical texts into fan-generated narratives requires learners to reinterpret, expand, and restructure source material, promoting higher-order thinking and creative textual production (Stanko, 2024a). These findings suggest that fan fiction serves not only as a creative activity but also as a form of narrative scaffolding that facilitates the development of writing skills.

The affective dimension of fan fiction engagement is another recurring theme in the literature. Researchers emphasize that emotional involvement and personal investment are crucial

to sustaining learner motivation and encouraging active participation in writing practices. Fan fiction communities are often marked by strong affective engagement, identity exploration, and emotional attachment to narratives and characters (Samutina, 2017). From a psycholinguistic perspective, fan fiction discourse shows high levels of creativity, expressive flexibility, and linguistic hybridity, which may foster greater learner confidence and willingness to experiment with language (Zoriana, 2018). Studies on representation, intimacy, and identity in fan communities further underscore the social and emotional significance of participatory writing practices (Ling & Hongwei, 2012). In pedagogical contexts, such affective engagement may reduce writing anxiety and increase students' readiness to produce extended, meaningful texts.

At the same time, contemporary writing instruction is increasingly shaped by technological innovation and artificial intelligence. Recent studies indicate that AI tools can support writing development by generating feedback, organizing ideas, and providing personalized learning environments (Crompton & Burke, 2023; Patty, 2024). Research also highlights the growing role of multimodal AI tools in mediating linguistic development in EFL academic writing (Tomchakovskyi et al., 2026). However, scholars warn against overreliance on AI technologies, pointing to potential risks to learner autonomy, critical thinking, and originality (Sabzalieva & Valentini, 2023). Discussions surrounding AI in higher education therefore emphasize the need to balance technological affordances with pedagogically meaningful, creativity-oriented practices (Editor's Note, 2024). In this context, recent studies on AI-assisted fan fiction writing show that combining digital technologies with participatory narrative practices may create new opportunities for creative language learning while raising questions about authorship and authenticity (Stanko, 2024b).

In addition, broader linguistic and discourse-oriented approaches help frame fan fiction as a context-dependent communicative practice. Contextual approaches to language learning emphasize the roles of discourse, situational meaning, and communicative interaction in vocabulary and writing development (Yablonska, 2020). Ethical and cultural aspects of fan fiction production, including ownership, distribution, and accessibility, further situate fan fiction within broader debates about digital literacy and participatory culture (De Kosnik, 2009).

Overall, the reviewed literature demonstrates that fan fiction has significant pedagogical potential as a participatory, emotionally engaging, and narratively scaffolded form of writing practice. Existing studies confirm its relevance to creativity, discourse competence, and learner motivation. However, despite growing theoretical interest in fan fiction and digital literacy practices, there remains insufficient empirical research examining whether fan fiction-based instruction directly improves students' writing skills in EFL higher education contexts. In particular, limited attention has been paid to measuring the impact of fan fiction activities on specific components of writing development, including organization, coherence, linguistic accuracy, and creative expression. This research gap provides the rationale for the present study.

Methodology

The present study adopts an empirical mixed-methods design to investigate the effectiveness of teaching writing through fan fiction in a higher education context. The research was conducted at Uzhhorod National University during the 2025–2026 academic year as part of an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) writing course.

The study's methodological framework is grounded in contemporary approaches to EFL writing, genre pedagogy, and sociocultural learning. The research draws on Swales's genre theory, which conceptualizes writing as participation in discourse communities and genre-based communicative practices (Swales, 1990); Ferris and Hedgcock's learner-centered approach to L2 composition, which emphasizes drafting, feedback, and collaborative writing (Ferris & Hedgcock, 2023); and Hyland's view of writing as a socially situated, interactional process focused on audience awareness and communicative purpose (Hyland, 2024). The study is also informed by Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, particularly the concepts of scaffolding and learning through social interaction (Vygotsky, 1978).

The research addresses an important gap in EFL writing studies. Although fan fiction has been widely examined as a participatory and cultural phenomenon, limited empirical research has examined its effectiveness as a structured pedagogical tool for improving measurable writing performance in EFL higher education contexts.

The study included 48 undergraduate students majoring in Philology (specialization: English language and literature), aged 18–21, with intermediate to upper-intermediate English proficiency (B1–B2). The sample was selected through convenience sampling from intact university classes enrolled in the same academic writing course. The participant group showed a relatively balanced gender distribution (31 female and 17 male students).

Prior to the intervention, students completed a background questionnaire assessing their familiarity with fan fiction, digital literacy practices, and fandom participation. The results indicated moderate prior fandom exposure: approximately 62% of participants reported prior experience reading fan fiction, while only 27% reported prior experience writing fan fiction.

Two intact classes were randomly assigned to either the experimental group (n = 24) or the control group (n = 24). Initial diagnostic testing confirmed that both groups had comparable levels of writing proficiency before the instructional intervention.

The study used a pre-test/post-test quasi-experimental design. At the start of the course, both groups completed a diagnostic writing task to assess baseline writing proficiency. During the subsequent eight-week instructional period, the experimental group engaged in structured fan fiction-based writing activities, while the control group followed a traditional academic writing curriculum focused on essays, summaries, and analytical compositions. At the end of the intervention, both groups completed a post-test writing assignment of comparable complexity.

The instructional intervention for the experimental group consisted of fan fiction-based tasks designed to develop narrative competence, discourse organization, and stylistic flexibility. Students selected familiar fictional universes, including literary works, films, and television series, and produced original texts that extended or transformed canonical narratives. Activities included

rewriting scenes from alternative perspectives, composing alternative endings, developing original characters, and creating crossover narratives.

The instructional process incorporated guided support focused on coherence, narrative structure, vocabulary development, stylistic variation, and audience awareness. Peer review sessions and collaborative feedback were integrated throughout the intervention to reflect the participatory nature of fan fiction communities.

The control group followed a traditional EFL writing syllabus that emphasized argumentative essays, descriptive compositions, and textual analysis, with teacher-centered feedback and conventional writing exercises.

Data collection used multiple instruments, including pre- and post-test writing samples, a student questionnaire measuring engagement and attitudes toward writing, semi-structured interviews with selected participants from the experimental group, and teacher observation notes documenting classroom interactions and participation patterns. The writing samples were evaluated with an analytic rubric assessing content development, organization, vocabulary, grammatical accuracy, and creativity.

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics, including mean score comparisons and paired t-tests to assess the significance of differences between pre- and post-test performance. Qualitative data from interviews and classroom observations were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns related to learner engagement, collaboration, creativity, and perceived writing development.

Participation in the study was voluntary, and all students provided informed consent before data collection. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained throughout the research process. Participants were informed that the results would be used solely for academic purposes and would not affect their course assessment.

Results

The results of the study demonstrate that integrating fan fiction into writing instruction produced a statistically and pedagogically significant effect on students' writing development compared with traditional approaches. At the initial stage of the experiment, the diagnostic pre-test confirmed that both the experimental and control groups had comparable levels of writing proficiency. The mean scores for the experimental group ($M = 64.3$, $SD = 6.8$) and the control group ($M = 65.1$, $SD = 7.1$) did not differ significantly ($t = 0.41$, $p > 0.05$), which ensured group equivalence and the validity of subsequent comparisons.

After the eight-week instructional period, both groups improved; however, the experimental group's progress was more substantial and consistent. The experimental group reached a mean score of 81.7 ($SD = 5.9$), whereas the control group achieved 73.4 ($SD = 6.5$). Statistical analysis confirmed that the experimental group's improvement was highly significant ($t = 9.84$, $p < 0.001$), while the control group also improved, though to a lesser extent ($t = 4.12$, $p < 0.05$). The difference between the groups' gain scores was statistically significant ($t = 3.76$, $p <$

0.01), indicating the greater effectiveness of fan fiction-based instruction. The calculated effect size further supports this conclusion, showing a large effect in the experimental group (d = 1.21) compared to a moderate effect in the control group (d = 0.58).

A closer examination of specific writing components shows that the most pronounced improvements in the experimental group occurred in content development and organization. Students began to produce more elaborate and coherent texts, with clearer narrative structures and more logically developed ideas. For instance, content scores in the experimental group rose from 13.2 to 18.9 (out of 20), while the control group showed a smaller increase from 13.5 to 16.4. Similarly, organization and coherence improved from 12.8 to 18.1 in the experimental group, compared with 13.0 to 15.9 in the control group. These results suggest that fan fiction tasks effectively support the development of discourse-level competence.

Creativity emerged as the most distinctive feature distinguishing the two groups. The experimental group showed a substantial increase in creative expression, with an approximate 45% rise in this component, whereas the control group showed only minimal change. Creativity was assessed as part of the analytic writing rubric and included indicators such as originality of ideas, narrative development, stylistic variation, imaginative engagement with the topic, and the ability to produce an identifiable authorial voice. The creativity component was evaluated on a five-point scale by two independent raters to ensure scoring reliability. Students in the experimental group displayed greater flexibility in language use, a wider range of stylistic choices, and a stronger sense of authorial voice. Their texts reflected not only improved structure but also greater originality and engagement with narrative elements.

Both groups showed improvements in vocabulary and grammatical accuracy, though the gains were less pronounced. In the experimental group, vocabulary scores rose from 12.5 to 16.7, while the control group improved from 12.7 to 15.8. Grammar scores followed a similar pattern. Qualitative analysis indicates that the experimental group demonstrated greater lexical diversity and contextual appropriateness, as well as a higher frequency of complex syntactic structures. This is further supported by lexical diversity measures, with a type-token ratio of 0.61 in the experimental group compared to 0.52 in the control group.

The questionnaire results provide additional evidence of the intervention's effectiveness. Students in the experimental group reported significantly higher motivation (M = 4.6) than the control group (M = 3.4), and the difference was statistically significant ($t = 4.52$, $p < 0.001$). Their self-reported confidence in writing also increased more substantially, rising from 3.1 to 4.3, whereas the control group showed only a slight increase from 3.2 to 3.6. A large majority of students in the experimental group (87%) reported that they found the tasks engaging and enjoyable, compared with 54% in the control group.

Qualitative findings complement these results by revealing consistent patterns in students' experiences. Interview data and classroom observations indicate that students in the experimental group were more actively engaged in learning and demonstrated higher levels of participation. The collaborative nature of fan fiction tasks encouraged peer interaction, discussion, and feedback,

contributing to a more dynamic classroom environment. Students also showed a greater willingness to experiment with language and take creative risks.

Another important finding concerns reduced writing-related anxiety. Students in the experimental group reported feeling less constrained and more confident when completing writing tasks, which positively affected their fluency and overall performance. This is reflected in the increased length of their written texts, which grew by approximately 28%, compared with a 12% increase in the control group. Additionally, the experimental group showed a more pronounced reduction in repetitive grammatical errors and greater use of cohesion markers, indicating improved control over textual organization.

Overall, the convergence of statistical results and qualitative insights provides strong empirical evidence for the effectiveness of teaching writing through fan fiction. The findings show that this approach not only improves measurable aspects of writing performance but also boosts students' motivation, engagement, and confidence, thereby supporting a more comprehensive, learner-centered model of writing instruction.

Discussion

The findings of the present study provide a positive answer to the research question of whether fan fiction-based instruction improves students' writing skills in an EFL context. The results indicate that students exposed to fan fiction writing activities made greater gains in writing performance than those following a traditional academic writing syllabus. The most substantial improvements were observed in content development, organization, coherence, creativity, and learner engagement. These outcomes suggest that fan fiction can serve as an effective pedagogical tool for developing both linguistic and discourse competence in higher education EFL instruction.

The findings can be interpreted in light of previous studies discussed in the literature review. First, the results support research highlighting the participatory nature of fan fiction communities and collaborative literacy practices (Hills, 2008; Weitin & Werber, 2023). The integration of peer review, collaborative discussion, and shared narrative construction in the experimental group appeared to foster more active learner participation and greater communicative involvement. This aligns with Hyland's (2024) view of writing as a socially situated, interactional process shaped by audience awareness and discourse community participation.

The results also align with studies highlighting fan fiction's role in narrative scaffolding and genre-based learning (Knight, 2016; Donaldson & Pope, 2022). Because students worked within familiar fictional frameworks, they could focus more effectively on discourse organization, coherence, and stylistic variation rather than on generating entirely new narrative contexts. In this respect, fan fiction appears to provide cognitive and structural support for writing development, consistent with Swales's genre-oriented approach to writing instruction.

In addition, the findings support Samutina's (2017) argument that fan fiction constitutes an emotionally immersive literacy practice. Students in the experimental group showed greater motivation, confidence, and willingness to undertake extended writing tasks. The reduction in

writing-related anxiety observed during the intervention suggests that emotionally meaningful, personally engaging writing environments may positively influence learners' writing performance and participation.

The present study also supports Ferris and Hedgcock's (2023) process-oriented approach to L2 writing, particularly the importance of drafting, revision, interaction, and feedback in writing development. The collaborative and recursive nature of the fan fiction tasks encouraged students to revise their texts, exchange feedback, and experiment with language, thereby improving organization, vocabulary, and creative expression.

Furthermore, the findings may be interpreted in light of recent discussions about digital literacy and technology-enhanced learning (Crompton & Burke, 2023; Patty, 2024). Although the study did not focus directly on artificial intelligence tools, the results demonstrate that innovative writing instruction can arise from participatory digital genres and learner-centered writing environments. Fan fiction, therefore, is not only a form of informal digital culture but also a pedagogically meaningful discourse practice that can support writing instruction in contemporary educational contexts.

At the same time, the study extends previous scholarship by providing empirical evidence of the effectiveness of fan fiction-based instruction in measurable EFL writing development. Whereas much existing research has focused primarily on the cultural, interpretive, or affective dimensions of fan fiction, the present study demonstrates its practical value for improving students' writing performance in formal higher education settings.

The present study has several limitations. First, the research used a relatively small sample from a single university, limiting the generalizability of the findings. Second, the intervention lasted only eight weeks, making it difficult to assess the long-term effects of fan fiction-based instruction.

The results may also have been influenced by the novelty effect, as fan fiction was an unusual and engaging instructional approach for many students. In addition, differences in participants' prior familiarity with fandom culture may have affected their engagement and writing performance. Finally, the teacher effect should be considered, as the instructor's feedback style and classroom interactions may have influenced the study's outcomes.

Conclusion

The study demonstrates that teaching writing through fan fiction is an effective and pedagogically relevant approach in EFL higher education. The results show that students engaged in fan fiction-based activities achieved greater gains in writing performance, particularly in content development, organization, and creativity, while also displaying higher levels of motivation and confidence than those following traditional instruction.

These findings underscore the value of integrating participatory and creative practices into writing pedagogy. Fan fiction offers a supportive framework that lowers cognitive barriers, fosters experimentation, and promotes learner autonomy. At the same time, it aligns writing instruction

with students' real-world digital literacy practices, making learning more meaningful and engaging.

Based on the study's findings, several practical recommendations can be proposed for implementing fan fiction-based writing instruction in EFL higher education contexts. First, fan fiction activities may be integrated into EFL writing curricula as supplementary genre-based tasks to develop creativity, discourse competence, and learner engagement. Curriculum design should combine creative narrative writing with structured instruction in coherence, vocabulary development, and audience awareness. Second, teacher training programs should prepare instructors to use participatory digital genres in writing instruction. EFL instructors need methodological guidance on organizing collaborative writing activities, moderating peer feedback, and integrating creative writing practices into formal academic contexts. Third, classroom implementation should account for students' diverse interests, cultural backgrounds, and gender-related preferences in fandom participation and narrative themes. Providing learners with opportunities to choose familiar fictional universes and genres may increase inclusivity and engagement across different student groups. Finally, flexible classroom implementation models may be adopted, including individual writing tasks, collaborative fan fiction projects, peer-review workshops, and blended learning formats that integrate digital platforms. Such models can support both traditional and technology-enhanced approaches to EFL writing instruction.

Although the study is limited by its sample size and context, it provides empirical evidence that fan fiction can be a viable and innovative means of developing writing competence. Future research may further explore its integration with digital tools and in broader educational settings.

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