Exploring EFL learners' engagement with YouTube fandom: An inquiry into language learning and soft skill development

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Abstract: This study explores the integration of YouTube fandom as a method for English language learning and soft skill development within the Moroccan EFL context. The research evaluates how the cultural content within fandoms enhances linguistic proficiency and 21st-century competencies. Eighteen EFL students from the École Normale Supérieure (ENS), Moulay Ismail University, Meknes, Morocco participated in a one-month experiment involving active engagement in YouTube fandoms. A mixed-method approach, combining questionnaire data and group discussion, reveals remarkable improvements in language skills and the development of critical soft skills, such as critical thinking, communication, digital literacy, to name a few. The study highlights the pedagogical potential of informal digital spaces, such as YouTube fandoms, in today's interconnected, digitally-driven educational landscape, emphasizing their role in promoting meaningful language learning and holistic skill development.

Keywords: *English language skills, Fandom, Fanfiction, Online fan communities, Soft skills, YouTube fandom.*

1. Introduction

Fandom, or online fan communities, has become an innovative approach in language education, fostering personalized, autonomous learning in informal settings. Platforms like *Reddit, Tumblr, Archive of Our Own, Wattpad, Twitter, TikTok*, and *YouTube* offer rich opportunities to enhance language and soft skills. By joining communities centered on shared interests, fans engage with authentic materials-videos, audio, and written content-often in English, the global lingua franca. This interaction promotes language learning and the development of essential soft skills (Sauro & Zourou, 2019).

Henry Jenkins, a prominent scholar in media studies, highlights fandom as a participatory culture where fans actively engage with and transform media content, contributing to broader cultural dialogues. This involvement enables fans to reinterpret narratives and create derivative works, shaping the media landscape. Fandoms act as alternative social communities that foster connections through shared interests and creative contributions, allowing individuals to collaborate, exchange ideas, and build relationships that enhance their sense of belonging and identity. This dynamic interaction enriches the fan experience and empowers fans to influence the narratives within their favorite media.

While previous research has focused on YouTube's role in formal education (e.g., Hsu & Ching, 2013; Morris & Orso, 2019), this study investigates the underexplored potential of YouTube fandoms in self-directed learning. Specifically, it examines their role in language learning and personal development among Moroccan EFL learners. By analyzing the experiences of these learners within fandom communities, the study seeks to demonstrate the pedagogical potential of such informal, interest-driven learning environments. The study is underpinned by the following hypothesis: Participation in YouTube fandoms enhances English language proficiency and fosters the development of 21st-century soft skills, while also increasing enjoyment and perceived effectiveness of language learning among Moroccan EFL learners.

To explore this hypothesis further, the study poses the following research questions:

1) Does participation in YouTube fandoms improve English proficiency and enhance 21st-century soft skills among Moroccan EFL learners?
2) Which language skills and soft skills show significant improvement through participation in YouTube fandoms?
3) How do Moroccan EFL learners perceive the enjoyment and effectiveness of language learning in YouTube fandoms?

By including the hypothesis and research questions, the investigation seeks to provide a structured framework for exploring the impact of fandom approach in language education.

2. Review of the Literature

This literature review delves into how technology and social media, specifically *YouTube* and online fandoms, transform English language learning and soft skill development. It examines the intersection of technology, social media, and education, exploring how these elements offer innovative opportunities for learner autonomy and engagement.

2.1. The Rise of Technology and Web 2.0

Advancements in technology have dramatically reshaped the educational landscape, bringing about transformative changes that extend far beyond traditional teaching methods. The advent of digital tools such as online platforms, educational software, and virtual reality has redefined the classroom experience by infusing it with unprecedented levels of engagement, personalization, and accessibility. As Leung and Valdés (2019) elucidate, these technological innovations have positively advanced foreign language education, enriching the overall educational landscape. Moreover, these developments create a more immersive and interactive learning environment, allowing students to engage with content in dynamic and meaningful ways. The Internet's vast array of resources allows students to explore diverse content, thus enhancing their educational experiences and broadening their exposure to various linguistic inputs. Similarly, Choi and Chung (2021) underscore that technological advancements have invigorated student interest and motivation, creating richer opportunities for interaction and engagement with the target language. Tools such as *Google Classroom* and *Microsoft Teams* exemplify how Web 2.0 technologies foster collaborative learning and resource sharing, while educational apps like *Duolingo* and *Quizlet* cater to individual learning preferences, making the acquisition of knowledge more dynamic and tailored.

Furthermore, technology plays an essential role in nurturing learner autonomy and enhancing educational efficiency. Benson (2019) identifies three essential ways in which technology enhances language learning: it allows learners to take control of their devices and learning processes, grants access to authentic target language resources, and promotes interactive use of the language. This paradigm shift allows learners to manage their time more effectively, access resources at their convenience, and engage in blended learning experiences that support language skills development. The incorporation of interactive and multimedia resources, such as those found in apps like *Babbel* and *Rosetta Stone*, further exemplifies how technology caters to varied learning styles and fosters creativity. Additionally, the integration of game-based learning platforms, as evidenced by research from Plass et al. (2015), underscores the significant impact of technology on student motivation and achievement. Overall, learners in this digital age are empowered to explore new horizons, experiment with innovative tools, and harness the full potential of technology to enhance their educational journey.

2.2. Social Media and Informal Learning in the Digital Age

In the digital age, informal learning has gained prominence as a flexible, self-directed approach to knowledge acquisition, moving beyond traditional educational frameworks. Unlike formal education, which follows structured curricula and predefined outcomes, informal learning is spontaneous and driven by personal interests (Eraut, 2004). Digital platforms such as social media, online forums, and video-sharing sites like *YouTube* have transformed how learners access content, enabling exploration of diverse topics, peer collaboration, and personalized learning experiences. Greenhow and Lewin (2016) highlight that these spaces foster dynamic interactions that enhance personal and intellectual growth.

Participatory cultures exemplify this concept, with Jenkins et al. (2009) highlighting how these communities foster immersive environments that promote the development of skills in communication, problem-solving, and critical thinking.

Moreover, social media has revolutionized informal learning, particularly in language learning and skill development. Platforms like *Facebook*, *YouTube*, *Twitter*, *Instagram*, and *WhatsApp* embed educational content in engaging contexts, with Facebook groups facilitating discussions and *YouTube* providing a wealth of instructional videos (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Twitter and Instagram promote real-time interactions, while *WhatsApp* enhances peer communication (Zachos et al., 2018). Research by Nasution (2022) demonstrates that social media significantly enhances students' language skills such as reading, writing, and vocabulary while also boosting their motivation. This user-driven approach enriches the language learning experience by making it interactive and relevant to learners' interests. The integration of social media into informal learning environments marks a transformative shift that aligns educational outcomes with contemporary learners' needs.

2.3. *YouTube as a Social Media Platform Transforming Traditional Language Learning*

YouTube has significantly transformed language learning by providing a wide array of multimedia resources that enhance engagement and comprehension. Dizon (2022) discusses how the platform's integration of visual and auditory elements can improve vocabulary acquisition and cognitive processing. This blend not only facilitates a richer language learning experience but also allows learners to access authentic content, making language use more relevant and contextualized. Furthermore, Dizon emphasizes the platform's utility in both formal and informal learning settings, showcasing its versatility for various types of learners. By utilizing interactive videos, learners benefit from immersive content that supports retention and understanding, especially appealing to younger audiences and those seeking a dynamic learning approach. Additionally, YouTube promotes learner autonomy, allowing individuals to select videos tailored to their educational needs and interests, which fosters personalized and self-directed learning (Chen, 2013). This flexibility not only aligns with individual learning goals but also boosts motivation and enjoyment.

Beyond language skills, YouTube democratizes education by overcoming geographical and cultural barriers. It offers access to diverse content featuring native and non-native speakers, providing exposure to authentic language use, accents, and informal expressions (Alwehaibi, 2015). The platform's interactive features, including comments and discussions, create a virtual community where learners engage with content creators and peers, sharing insights and developing critical thinking skills (Watkins & Wilkins, 2011). With its user-friendly interface, accessibility across devices, and features like subtitles and adjustable playback speeds, YouTube serves as a versatile tool for learners at all levels. Through its multimedia resources and interactivity, YouTube has become an essential resource for modern language learners, facilitating both formal and informal educational experiences.

2.4. *The Concept of Fandom and its Importance in Language Learning*

Fandom, originally a term for sports enthusiasts (Rutherford-Morrison, 2016), has evolved into a vibrant community centered around a shared passion for various media, including TV shows, movies, books, and video games. This transformation has given rise to activities such as fanfiction, fan art, fansubbing, fandubbing, and online discussions, reflecting diverse engagement with favorite media. The rise of online platforms has expanded fandom's scope, enabling individuals from different locations to connect and form communities based on shared interests (Jenkins, 2006). This digital dimension fosters a sense of belonging and community among fans, facilitating both active participation and passive consumption of content (Jenkins, 1992).

Recently, fandom has become a significant asset in language learning, particularly for those studying English as a Foreign Language (EFL). This recognition stems from fandom-based activities that offer learners authentic exposure to language beyond traditional classrooms (Black, 2009). Online fan communities provide real-world language experiences, including colloquial expressions, slang, and cultural references. For instance, English language learners engaged with fan communities practice their skills in diverse, real-world contexts (Hernández-López & Urbar-Serrano, 2024). This immersion

allows learners to bridge the gap between formal instruction and practical application, facilitating a nuanced understanding of the language.

The informal, self-directed nature of fandom aligns seamlessly with Online Informal Learning of English (OILE), where learners acquire language skills naturally outside formal settings (Sockett, 2014). Unlike traditional academic environments with structured curricula, fandom-driven learning thrives on personal interest and motivation, sustaining engagement and fostering a deeper connection with the language (Sockett & Kusyk, 2015). Furthermore, engaging with fandoms provides insights into cultural phenomena, enabling learners to grasp the values, humor, and societal norms prevalent in English-speaking communities. This cultural immersion enriches learners' language understanding, offering a holistic educational experience (Hernández-López & Urbar-Serrano, 2024).

Fandom-based learning promotes collaboration and feedback through activities such as fanfiction writing, art creation, and group discussions, fostering belonging and facilitating language development via peer interactions (Sauro, 2017). Its multimodal nature, encompassing written text, audiovisual content, and interactive platforms, enhances literacy skills, including reading comprehension and visual literacy (Hernández-López & Urbar-Serrano, 2024). Digital tools like *Reddit*, *Tumblr*, and *YouTube* augment these activities, providing spaces for sharing fanfiction, fan art, and fan-made videos, while platforms like *Twitter* and *Instagram* encourage real-time engagement and collaborative projects. Additionally, sites such as *Archive of Our Own* and *Wattpad* offer creative outlets for fandom-driven writing, introducing innovative methods for language practice and skill development within popular fandoms like "Harry Potter" and "Star Wars" (Sauro, 2019).

2.4.1. *YouTube as a Venue for Practicing Fandom*

Fandom can be actively practiced on *YouTube*, a platform renowned for its participatory environment that supports language learning (Chic, 2014; Harlow, 2018). *YouTube* offers fans the opportunity to engage with a variety of content, including fan-made videos, discussions, and commentary, creating a rich landscape for immersive language practice (Jenkins, 2009). This interaction with content allows learners to encounter authentic language use, encompassing slang, idioms, and colloquial expressions. Such engagement requires deep cognitive processing and critical thinking, distinguishing YouTube fandom interactions from more passive content consumption (Jenkins, 2009).

YouTube fandoms are diverse communities centered around various types of content and creators. Creator fandoms, such as those for *PewDiePie* and *Shane Dawson*, engage deeply with their favorite personalities. Genre-based fandoms include gaming enthusiasts following channels like *Markiplier*. Franchise fandoms revolve around content related to popular series, such as *Screen Junkies* for "Star Wars". Music fans gather around artists like *BTS* and *Billie Eilish*, while vlogging communities follow creators like *Casey Neistat* and *David Dobrik*. Educational fandoms appreciate channels like *CrashCourse*, while reaction and commentary groups engage with content from *Philip DeFranco*. These examples illustrate how YouTube fosters vibrant, specialized communities, each contributing to the platform's rich cultural landscape.

The process of becoming a fan typically involves cultivating a profound emotional connection to the content creator or their media, often fueled by the creator's distinctive personality, relatable themes, or innovative approaches. For instance, fans may be captivated by a creator's style, humor, or insights, which engenders a sense of community and shared interest (Jenkins, 2006; Black, 2008). This connection fosters deeper engagement in content consumption, producing fan videos or writing fanfiction. Most importantly, fans exhibit loyalty to the creator, demonstrating their commitment through consistent engagement with the creator's work, active participation in discussions, and support for creators through various forms of interaction (Jenkins, 2006; Black, 2008).

2.4.2. *Language and Soft Skill Development through YouTube Fandom*

Engaging with YouTube fandoms immerses language learners in practical activities like creating fan videos, participating in discussions, and collaborating on creative projects, all of which significantly develop language skills. Such interactions expand vocabulary, enhance grammar and writing, and strengthen listening and speaking abilities through exposure to diverse and authentic content

(Reinhardt & Thorne, 2019). International YouTubers introduce various dialects, accents, and colloquial expressions, deepening learners' cultural understanding of English. For example, channels like *Philip DeFranco's* present complex vocabulary and informal language, improving learners' comprehension and contextual grasp.

These activities align with Hymes' (1972) concept of communicative competence, promoting authentic language use through tasks such as commenting and writing, which improve reading skills and expose learners to diverse registers (Reinhardt & Thorne, 2019). Additionally, *YouTube* fills gaps in socio-pragmatic skills often overlooked in formal education, enabling learners to navigate varied speech patterns and conversation styles. Kasper and Rose (2002) note that videos, livestreams, and discussions enhance listening comprehension by exposing learners to different accents and speech rates, while also refining speaking skills, including pronunciation and grammar (Reinhardt & Thorne, 2019). Furthermore, active participation in fandoms fosters intercultural competence, as learners engage with idiomatic expressions and cultural references, enhancing their awareness and adaptability in multicultural settings. Blattner and Fiori (2011) emphasize that YouTube connects learners with the target language community, offering authentic language experiences beyond classroom limitations and developing critical thinking, adaptability, and digital literacy skills crucial for academic and professional contexts.

2.5. Theoretical Foundation behind Online Learning Communities

The evolution of theoretical frameworks in online learning communities reflects a significant shift from traditional educational paradigms to dynamic, participatory cultures, a transformation exemplified by the practices within fandoms. At the core of this transition lies constructivism, a theory rooted in the works of Piaget (1973) and Vygotsky (1978). This theory, highly relevant to the contemporary context of fandoms, posits that learning is an active, socially mediated process in which individuals construct knowledge through meaningful interaction and engagement. Fandom communities demonstrate this constructivist principle by fostering collaborative environments where members engage not merely as passive consumers of content but as active participants who contribute to the collective knowledge of the group through dialogue, co-creation, and critical engagement.

Expanding upon the principles of constructivism, Lave and Wenger's (1991) framework of Legitimate Peripheral Participation (LPP) provides a more nuanced understanding of how individuals transition from peripheral roles to central positions of expertise within a community. LPP asserts that learners initially engage in peripheral activities that require minimal risk and gradually progress toward more complex, high-stakes tasks as they gain proficiency and confidence. This trajectory is mirrored within fandom communities, where novice participants often begin as observers before gradually immersing themselves in activities such as content creation, fan fiction writing, or collaborative projects. Over time, their participation becomes increasingly sophisticated, allowing them to ascend to central roles as recognized contributors or even community leaders. This developmental process not only facilitates the acquisition of technical and creative skills but also cultivates a sense of identity, belonging, and agency within the community.

In the context of the digital age, connectivism, articulated by Siemens (2005) and Downes (2007), offers a contemporary perspective that foregrounds the importance of navigating an ever-evolving, networked information landscape. Unlike traditional cognitive theories that emphasize the individual's capacity to internalize knowledge, connectivism acknowledges that learning is inherently distributed across networks of digital resources, tools, and social connections. This theoretical orientation finds resonance in Social Networking theory, which underscores the essential role of online relationships in fostering collaborative learning and the exchange of information (Wellman, 2001). Fandom communities exemplify this interconnected model of learning, using digital platforms such as social media, discussion forums, and Personal Learning Networks to engage in knowledge sharing, peer collaboration, and communal problem-solving. These participatory ecosystems illustrate how contemporary learners navigate and synthesize diverse streams of information, thereby redefining the boundaries of education in an increasingly interconnected and decentralized digital landscape.

This literature review highlights the transformative impact of fandom and digital platforms like *YouTube* on language learning. It demonstrates how these platforms foster community and collaboration, enhancing learners' understanding of the target language while developing essential soft skills. Recognizing fandom as a participatory culture empowers learners to engage actively in their educational journeys, bridging informal and formal contexts.

3. Main Study

This study explores the impact of YouTube fandom engagement on language and soft skills development among Moroccan EFL students at the ENS, Moulay Ismail University, Meknes, Morocco. Using a mixed-methods design, the research involves a focus group of eighteen participants to investigate how active participation in YouTube fandoms over one month enhances linguistic abilities and interpersonal competencies. The goal is to provide insights into the educational potential of digital fandoms.

3.1. Sampling Technique and Participants' Profiles

Convenience sampling was used to select eighteen semester 4 students from the English Studies program, aged 19 to 21 years (83.3% females and 16.7% males), during the 2023-2024 academic year. This focus group served as the experimental group in the study design. The subjects' proficiency levels ranged between B2 and C1 according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). Their evaluation was based on the researchers' familiarity with the students' levels and the analysis of their exam answers and scores. Although convenience sampling does not ensure representativeness, it facilitates practical recruitment aligned with the study's objectives, providing relevant insights into the impact of YouTube fandom on the development of language and soft skills.

3.2. Experiment Protocol and Data Collection Methods

The experiment involved eighteen participants as mentioned before, all of whom volunteered after an informal class discussion. Ethical considerations were prioritized, with participants signing an informed consent form. To ensure a consistent baseline, only students with no prior experience in fandoms were chosen. The selected participants were enrolled in a dedicated *Google Classroom* specifically established for this study.

To facilitate effective tracking of student engagement with fandom, the researcher monitored participants through their uploaded screen captures and ongoing feedback. Initially, students completed a survey to identify their interests, which informed the selection of relevant YouTube fandoms across diverse categories, including true crime, entertainment, animation, gaming, cooking, fashion, lifestyle and travel vlogs, influencer and celebrity updates, life success stories and career development, documentaries and historical events, investigative journalism…etc. Participants chose their preferred fandoms and had the opportunity to propose additional ones, subject to the researcher's approval. They were instructed to engage actively by regularly watching videos, noting noteworthy language use, and participating in comment sections by reading, posting, and responding to comments.

To enhance monitoring and ensure adherence to the study's requirements, students uploaded, on a regular basis, screen captures of the videos they watched and their comments into designated slots within *Google Classroom.* Ten dedicated spaces were created for this purpose, allowing the researcher to systematically track participation and address any emerging issues. Participants were encouraged to provide immediate feedback regarding their experiences and to report any difficulties they encountered.

At the end of the one-month engagement period, students completed a structured feedback questionnaire designed to evaluate self-reported progress in language and soft skills. The questionnaire was established based on principles of construct and content validity, utilizing frameworks such as the Digital Competence Framework, the 21st Century Skills Framework, the Community of Practice model (CoP), and the Socio-cultural theory of learning to ensure comprehensive assessment of linguistic and cognitive skills. Adhering to best practices in language assessment, it underwent pilot testing for reliability and validity. Additionally, reflective and open-ended questions facilitated qualitative insights. Students also participated in a group discussion about the experiment, enriching the data collection

process. The results from both the questionnaire and the discussion will be analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively to evaluate the impact of YouTube fandoms on their academic and interpersonal development.

### 3.3. Fandoms Participants Engaged in during the Experiment

During the intervention, participants selected YouTube fandoms that aligned with their personal interests, leading to a diverse range of channel engagements. Some gravitated towards *Yes Theory*, a lifestyle and travel channel known for its immersive, experiential content, while others followed *Joshua Weissman* for culinary arts. Fans of celebrity culture chose *The Things Celebrity*, whereas true crime enthusiasts immersed themselves in channels like *True Crime Daily*, *Rotten Mango*, *Kendall Rae*, and *That Chapter* for detailed examinations of crime narratives. For historical documentaries, *TimeLine* provides rich insights into world history, while *Get Factual* focuses on significant historical events. Animation fans were drawn to *Pixar*, and those with a passion for investigative journalism followed *Vice News*. Additionally, participants interested in personal and professional growth explored *Brian Tracy* and *Improvement Pill*, while gaming enthusiasts engaged with *Elgin*, a channel dedicated to MOBA gaming. This carefully curated selection allowed participants to deeply immerse themselves in their chosen fandoms, enhancing their learning experiences through a broad spectrum of media.

3.4. Data Analysis

The data analysis section explores the outcomes of the one-month experiment by first examining how students accessed and participated in fandom communities, focusing on the frequency and nature of their interactions as well as the activities they engaged in. It then evaluates the experiment from the students' perspectives, highlighting the challenges they encountered, and their overall reflections on the experience. Both quantitative and qualitative data are mixed together to analyze various aspects of the experiment, providing a comprehensive understanding of the students' language improvements, soft skills development, and overall educational gains from participating in these online fandom communities.

### 3.4.1. Access, Integration, Frequency of Engagement, and Activities Conducted

The data on participants' engagement with YouTube channels and their fandoms indicates a largely positive experience. About 38.9% of participants found the engagement process "easy" suggesting smooth integration into these digital communities. Additionally, 27.8% reported it as "somewhat easy" indicating manageable engagement with minimal obstacles. A smaller segment, 11.1%, remained neutral regarding ease of access, while 22.2% experienced "somewhat challenging" difficulties in connecting with and participating in the fandoms (see Figure 1 below).
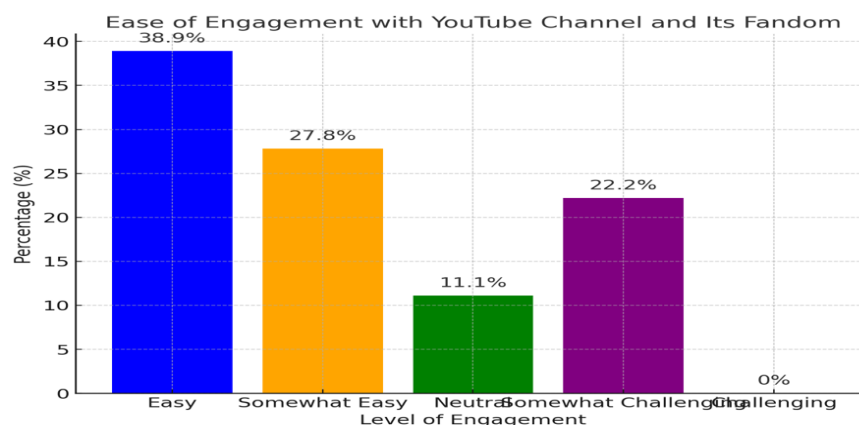
Figure 1.
Perceived ease of engagement with YouTube fandoms.

These results suggest that, while most participants had relatively little difficulty accessing and engaging with these communities, a notable portion faced barriers that warrant further exploration to understand the specific challenges impeding fuller participation.

The data on participants' engagement frequency with fandom content shows a strong inclination toward regular interaction. A notable 77.8% of students engage with fandom content several times a week, indicating consistent involvement, while 11.1% interact with the content daily. A smaller group engages multiple times a day or once a week, reflecting a range of engagement patterns. Overall, the findings highlight a prevalent trend of frequent engagement among most participants, with varying levels of involvement among others. This distribution is further illustrated in Figure 2 below.
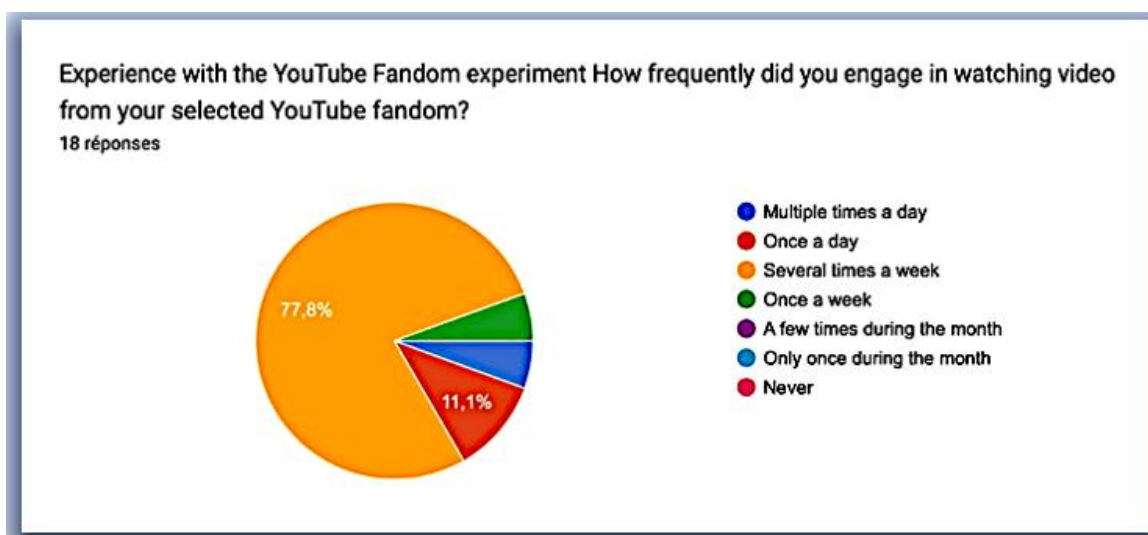
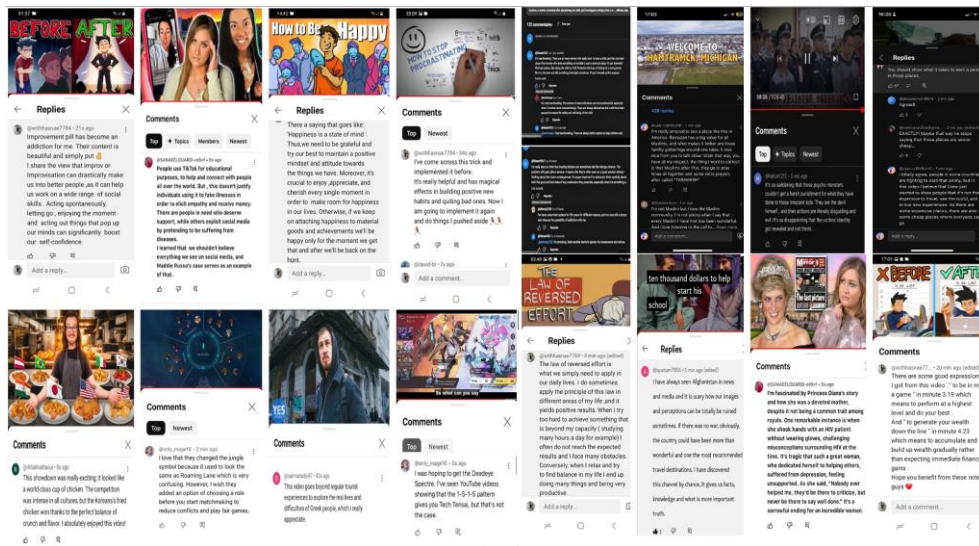**Figure 2.**
Frequency of engagement in YouTube fandom.

The data about the activities conducted reveals that participants actively engaged in various tasks, positioning YouTube fandom as a dynamic language-learning platform. All participants (100%) reported consistently watching videos, reading fellow fans' comments, posting their own remarks, and sharing screenshots with the researcher, demonstrating strong commitment to active participation. While a majority (61.1%) took notes during viewings, a significant portion (38.9%) did not engage in this practice. Engagement in conversations within the comment section was notably lower, with only 33.3% of participants actively participating. These findings highlight the widespread nature of video consumption and the selective nature of interactive dialogue within the fandom community. This multifaceted participation not only improved their language skills but also fostered a sense of belonging within the online community. Figure 3 below illustrates the percentages of students engaged in each activity.
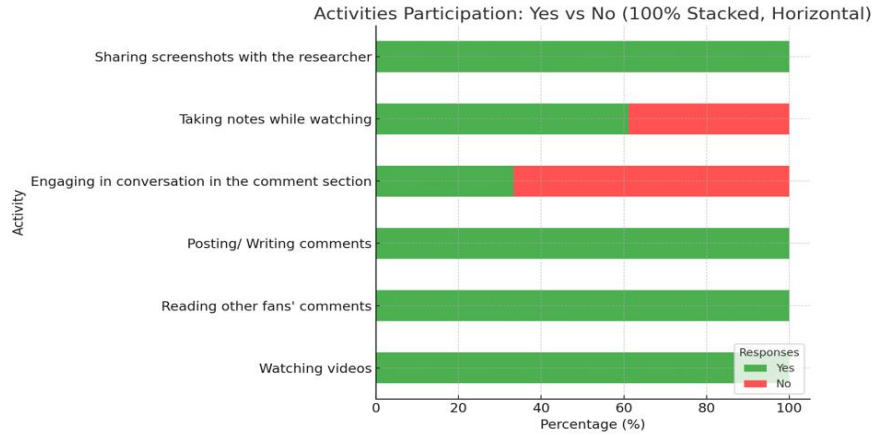
Figure 3.
Percentage of engagement in each assigned activity.

In the educational context, sharing screen captures is vital for research design and experimentation in fandoms. This practice, among others of course, enables educators to monitor student engagement and track learning progress, providing insights into the content consumed and interactions involved. By examining screen captures, teachers can analyze the language used by students within their chosen fandoms, enhancing understanding of their linguistic and cognitive development. Additionally, screen captures offer concrete evidence of informal learning processes, allowing educators to make data-driven adjustments to instructional design that foster targeted language practice and soft skills development. Examples of screen captures shared by students are provided in figure 4 below.

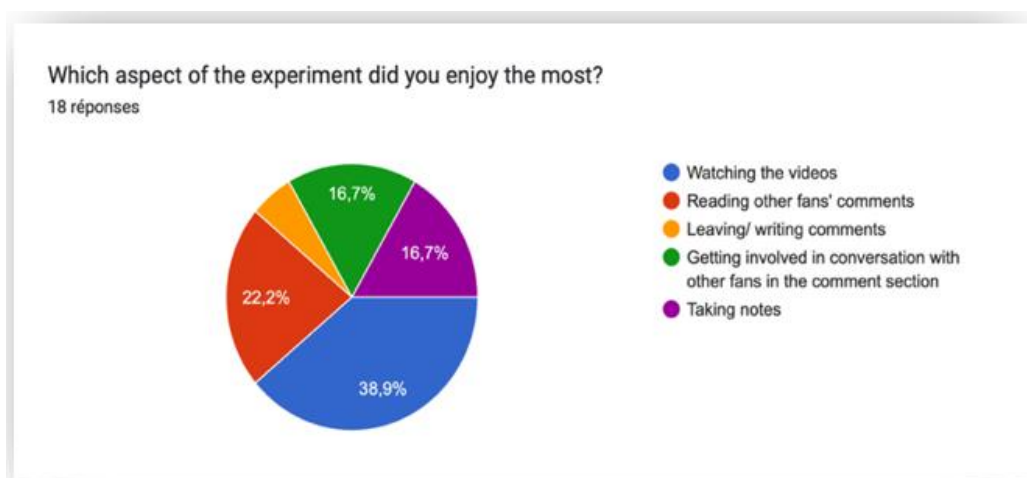**Figure 4.**
Screenshot samples from students' fandoms.

2.4.2. Evaluation of the Experiment

Participants overwhelmingly evaluated the YouTube fandom experiment positively, with 50% rating it highly favorable and 44% as positive, highlighting strong engagement and perceived benefits. Only 5.6% expressed a neutral stance, reflecting minimal ambivalence. These results underscore the experiment's potential to foster language learning and skill development in an informal, impactful setting. Figure 5 below demonstrates this.
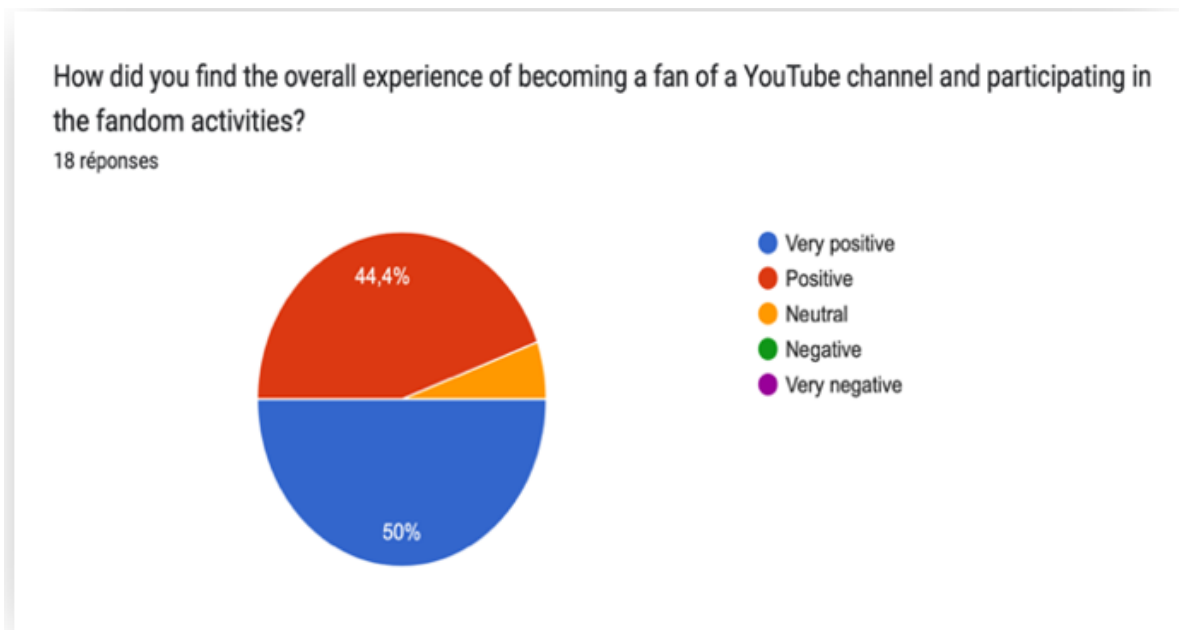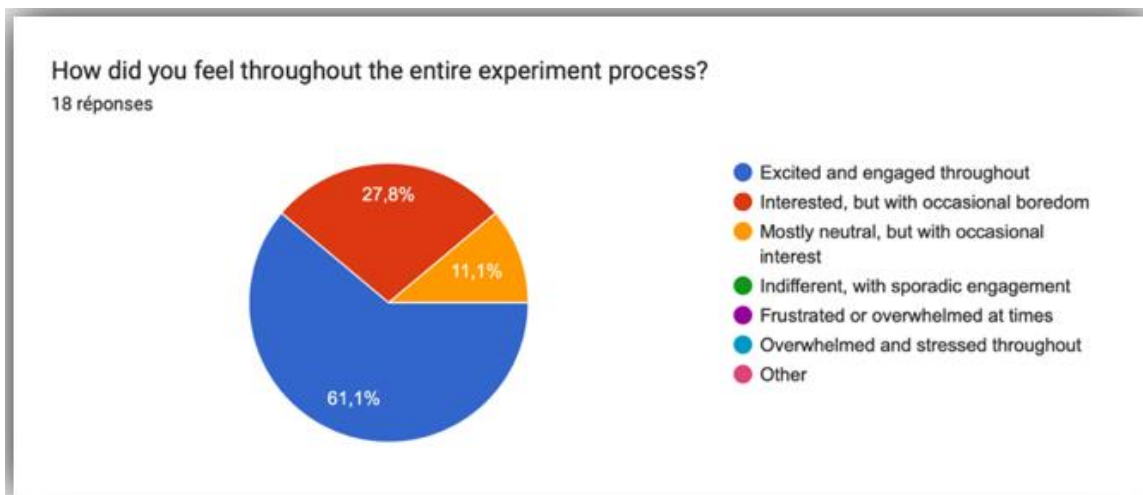
Figure 5.
Participants' evaluation of the fandom experiment.

Students enjoyed various activities during the experiment, with a clear preference hierarchy emerging. Watching videos was the favorite (38.9%), highlighting the engaging role of visual content in language learning. Reading fellow fans' comments followed at 22.2%, emphasizing the collaborative aspect of fan engagement. Conversations in the comment section and note-taking both captured 16.7% of enjoyment, underscoring the value of active participation and reflection. Posting comments accounted for the remaining share, showing a lesser but notable interest in personal expression. These results underscore the importance of both passive and active interaction in enhancing language learning as shown in figure 6 below.

Figure 6.
Activities most enjoyed by participants.

Regarding students' feelings throughout the experiment, 61.1% of students, as illustrated in figure 7 below, reported active engagement and excitement, while 27.8% expressed general interest, though occasionally interrupted by boredom. Another 11.1% maintained a neutral stance with moments of interest. Notably, no participant felt indifferent, frustrated, or overwhelmed, reflecting an overall positive reception. These findings highlight the success of YouTube fandom in creating an engaging and stimulating language learning environment.

Figure 7.
Participants' feelings throughout the experiment process.

In conclusion, the experiment produced positive results, with students expressing high levels of enjoyment and satisfaction. Their excitement and engagement indicate that incorporating YouTube fandom into learning effectively enhanced motivation and interest in language learning.

2.4.3. Language Skills Development

The positive evaluation of the experiment is closely tied to improvements in students' language skills. As participants engaged with YouTube fandom, their excitement led to significant gains in areas, such as vocabulary, grammar, and comprehension. This connection highlights the effectiveness of using contemporary media to enrich language learning, creating a more immersive and interactive educational experience.

Referring to the table below, students reported varying degrees of improvement across different language skills, underscoring the multifaceted impact of the experiment.

Table 1.
Language skills improved during the experiment.

	Freq.	**%**
Vocabulary and expressions	15	83.3
Accuracy / Grammar	6	33.33
Comprehension	5	27.78
Fluency	3	16.67
Reading	3	16.67
Listening	2	11.11
Pronunciation	2	11.11
Sentence meaning & pragmatic knowledge	1	5.56
Register (Formal vs. informal language)	1	5.56
No improvement area	1	5.56

Each participant experienced personalized growth, with key areas of improvement highlighted collectively. Notably, 83.3% reported significant gains in vocabulary and expressions, showcasing the impact of YouTube fandom on lexical expansion. Improvements in accuracy and grammar were noted by 33.33%, while comprehension, fluency, and reading were acknowledged by 27.78% and 16.67%. Listening and pronunciation saw modest improvement at 11.11%. This focus on vocabulary and various language components underscores the role of contemporary media in enriching language skills and deepening engagement with learning material.

The qualitative data reinforces the findings from the quantitative analysis, with students' reflections and comments closely aligning with the improvements in language skills indicated by the numerical results. Students reported enhancements in various skills through active participation in the fandom communities. Their reactions and feedback after the experiment provide further evidence of these gains, leading to the following illustrative examples of their comments.

Engaging with video content significantly enhances various language skills, particularly vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation. One participant expressed enthusiasm for expanding their vocabulary and understanding diverse sentence structures through consistent video consumption: *"I was thrilled to expand my vocabulary and understand various sentence structures through consistent video consumption, especially from a particularly talented content creator."* Another noted, *"During the experiment, I noticed significant improvements in several areas. My English vocabulary expanded, particularly with new terms in criminology, and I gained a better understanding of grammar. Additionally, my pronunciation improved."* Such reflections highlight that exposure to authentic language from native speakers is invaluable for holistic language development, enriching comprehension, fluency, and overall proficiency.

In addition to vocabulary expansion, the ability to understand language nuances is essential for effective communication. One participant articulated this understanding: *"I learned to distinguish between superficial and semantic meanings, recognizing when a sentence conveys a direct meaning and when it expresses deeper meanings, such as irony or sarcasm."* This insight underscores the importance of grasping contextual subtleties, which are crucial for conveying and interpreting meaning effectively.

The significance of context in language use cannot be overstated. One participant remarked on how focusing on career development necessitated the use of formal language in their comments: *"Since my fandom focused on career development, I needed to use formal language in my comments, which helped enhance my grammar. This experience also contributed to my overall growth in vocabulary and listening skills."* This experience illustrates how purposeful engagement in specific contexts can foster grammatical improvement and vocabulary expansion.

However, not all fandoms provide equal linguistic benefits. Certain fandoms may lack the complexity required for effective language development. One participant pointed out, *"The channel I chose focused on animated movies, so the language was clear and accessible, revolving around themes like love and friendship,"* while another noted, *"The language used in my fandom was simple and easy."* Such simplicity can hinder significant language acquisition by failing to introduce more complex grammatical structures and vocabulary. Therefore, students should choose fandoms that align with their proficiency levels and educational goals, as selecting content that offers linguistic challenges can enhance the learning experience and maximize the benefits of fandom interactions.

2.4.4. Soft Skill Development

Students reported that the experiment not only improved their language skills but also enhanced 21st-century competencies. Engaging with online communities fostered their communication, collaboration, and digital literacy while cultivating creativity, problem-solving, and adaptability. These findings emphasize the multifaceted value of integrating contemporary media into learning, as it promotes both linguistic growth and essential life skills in today's interconnected world.

Table 2 below presents the skills identified by students as areas of improvement, which emerged from an open-ended question rather than pre-suggested options.

Table 2.
Skills and competencies developed during the experiment.

Skill	Freq.	%
Critical thinking	12	66.67
Communication	5	27.78
Analysis	4	22.22
Attentive listening	4	22.22
Argumentation	3	16.67
Manners/politeness	3	16.67
Creativity	3	16.67
Self-confidence	3	16.67
Media litercay	2	11.11
Problem-solving	2	11.11
Collaboration	2	11.11
Negotiation	2	11.11
Language awareness	2	11.11
Cultural awareness	2	11.11
Adaptability	2	11.11
Networking	2	11.11
Evaluation	2	11.11
Logical reasoning	2	11.11
Reflection/reflexivity	2	11.11

The table results indicate a range of soft skills that students identified as improved during the experiment. Critical thinking topped the list, reported by 66.67% of participants, followed by communication at 27.78%. Analysis and attentive listening were noted by 22.22%, while argumentation, creativity, and self-confidence were recognized by 16.67%. Media literacy, problem-solving, collaboration, and cultural awareness each garnered acknowledgment from 11.11% of respondents, showcasing the experiment's significant impact on cognitive and interpersonal competencies.

The qualitative data from student comments support the quantitative findings, revealing a consistent pattern regarding the impact of fandoms on soft skills and competencies. Thematic analysis identifies key themes related to the enhancement of critical thinking, communication, media literacy, and active listening skills, all of which significantly enrich students' educational experiences.

Engagement with video content has notably fostered the development of critical thinking skills. One participant remarked, *"I developed critical thinking skills essential in criminology. It's crucial not to accept facts blindly and to question everything we see and hear. During the experiment, I took on the role of a detective, thoroughly analyzing each case in English, which was particularly beneficial."* Another noted, *"I identified flaws in numerous arguments, which led me to practice careful active listening and reading. I learned that effective reading or listening precedes effective rebuttal, using logic to formulate hypotheses about mysterious cases like the Great Flood."* These reflections underscore how video engagement cultivates essential critical thinking abilities for personal and academic growth.

Additionally, students reported significant improvements in their communication skills. One participant stated, *"The experiment helped me develop communication skills through interactions in the comment section, enhancing my critical thinking by evaluating content and considering different viewpoints."* Another added, *"I learned to craft my comments to ensure they are appropriate and do not offend anyone."* These insights affirm that participation in the experiment has enabled students to articulate their thoughts effectively and engage constructively with others.

Moreover, students have demonstrated significant growth in media literacy and the ability to consider multiple perspectives. As one student noted, *"I developed media literacy skills by selecting the right videos and commenting appropriately, enhancing my critical thinking by filtering knowledge from video creators."* This progress highlights the vital role of media literacy in empowering students to navigate diverse media landscapes critically.

The experiment has also enhanced students' active listening and reasoning skills, allowing them to identify flaws in arguments and engage constructively in discourse. One participant observed, *"I identified flaws in many arguments, which helped me practice careful active listening and reading, realizing that effective communication must precede effective rebuttal."* These developments emphasize the foundational importance of active listening and reasoning for effective engagement.

In summary, these themes illustrate the comprehensive skill development achieved through student engagement with video content, emphasizing the significance of critical thinking, communication, media literacy, and active listening in fostering well-rounded learners.

2.4.5. Insights into the YouTube Fandom Experiment: Benefits and Challenges

Participants in the YouTube fandom experiment articulated a spectrum of positive experiences, underscoring the value of engaging content, community connections, and personal development. A central theme emerging from their reflections is the enjoyment derived from compelling content, which plays a crucial role in motivating learners. One student stated, *"This experiment was highly effective, and I found considerable enjoyment in watching Brian's videos, prompting me to continue this engagement as a means of enhancing my English language skills."* This enjoyment highlights the importance of engaging content in fostering sustained language learning.

Furthermore, engaging with diverse online communities reshaped participants' perceptions of YouTube fandoms. A student noted,

> *Participating in the experiment transformed my perception of YouTube fandoms. I recognized them as vibrant communities while also acknowledging the challenges associated with time management and the prevalence of negative behaviors, such as toxicity. Furthermore, this experience has influenced my personal growth; previously hesitant to leave comments, I now embrace engagement with others in the comment sections.*

This insight illustrates how interactions within these communities can enhance social engagement and facilitate personal growth.

A sense of belonging emerged as a vital component of the learning experience. One student remarked,

> *I discovered that I share numerous interests with others, leading to a sense of belonging akin to finding my own community. Moreover, this experiment illuminated the constructive potential of YouTube, prompting me to integrate documentary viewing into my leisure activities. I am now committed to utilizing YouTube for educational purposes rather than engaging in aimless consumption.*

This emphasizes YouTube's potential as a valuable resource for meaningful engagement and learning.

While focused engagement with specific content areas yielded substantial knowledge acquisition, as highlighted this student: *"Being a member of a YouTube fandom has proven to be both entertaining and beneficial. Concentrating on a single channel afforded me the opportunity to acquire extensive knowledge regarding career development,"* participants also acknowledged limitations within certain content areas. A student pointed out, *"I observed a lack of interaction within the documentary niche compared to entertainment channels. I continue to view YouTube primarily as a platform for video enjoyment rather than a venue for active fandom, unlike Facebook or TikTok."* This indicates that the nature of content significantly influences interaction levels within fandom communities.

Despite these challenges, including difficulties in fostering meaningful engagement and adapting to the nature of longer video consumption, the experiment notably boosted student motivation. One participant expressed disappointment over the lack of responses to their comments, stating *"I eagerly anticipated viewer interactions with my comments, but that was not the case."* Others struggled with longer content, with one noting, *"I am used to watching short videos like Instagram's reels; therefore, watching long videos on YouTube was a bit difficult for me."* These challenges underscore the complexities of navigating online fandoms and highlight the need for a more interactive environment to enhance engagement and satisfaction.

Conversely, the experiment facilitated a transformation from passive consumption to active participation. Many participants reported a newfound willingness to comment and engage. One stated, *"I used to watch some YouTube videos but never left a comment; this experiment gave me the chance to do so."* Another remarked, *"YouTube was the least used application on my phone, but now it is one of the most used."* This shift illustrates a significant improvement in their communication skills, as they overcame hesitations about online commenting. Looking ahead, students expressed intentions to maintain these habits, emphasizing their commitment to ongoing learning. One stated, *"I plan to practice and improve my English by exploring more video content because it is both entertaining and beneficial."* Additionally, participants became more observant and reflective, with one indicating, *"I will pay closer attention to comments and what I can learn from them."* This engagement fosters critical thinking and a broader understanding of different perspectives, underscoring the experiment's effectiveness in integrating fandom into education while enriching both language skills and personal growth.

3. Findings and Discussion

The findings of this study illuminate the multifaceted impact of YouTube fandom on language learning and soft skill development among EFL learners. The participants engaged with YouTube content not merely as passive consumers but as active participants in a rich ecosystem of digital media, which aligns with the notion of participatory culture articulated by Jenkins (2006). This engagement facilitated an array of linguistic and social skills that mirror findings in the literature, particularly regarding the benefits of informal learning environments.

The data indicate that learners demonstrated marked improvements in various language skills, including reading comprehension, vocabulary acquisition, and listening proficiency. This outcome corroborates the assertions of Alwehaibi (2015) who found that exposure to diverse accents and authentic linguistic elements through media enhances language learners' proficiency. Participants in the current study reported increased motivation and enjoyment while learning through YouTube fandom, further supported by Sauro and Thorne's (2020) findings on the role of multimedia in fostering learner engagement and autonomy in fan-based language learning environments.

Additionally, the soft skills developed- such as collaboration, critical thinking, and cultural awareness - are crucial components of 21st-century education. These findings resonate with Benson (2019), who emphasizes the importance of autonomy in language learning, suggesting that the active engagement in fan communities can promote self-directed learning. The collaborative nature of fandom allows learners to negotiate meaning and construct knowledge collectively, a process echoed in Lave and Wenger's (1991) theory of situated learning, where learning is contextualized within social interactions.

Moreover, participants identified specific challenges encountered during their engagement with YouTube content, including difficulties in navigating the comment sections and managing the volume of available content. These challenges highlight the necessity for guidance in utilizing online platforms effectively for language learning, a point raised by Hamat and Abu Hassan (2019), who note that structured support in using social media can enhance language learning.

The integration of YouTube fandom into the curriculum has the potential to enrich traditional language learning methodologies, as evidenced by the learners' positive feedback on its effectiveness. This finding aligns with Sauro and Thorne's (2020) assertions regarding the advantages of incorporating technology in educational contexts. The data suggest that YouTube serves not only as a supplementary tool but as a transformative medium that reshapes learners' experiences and interactions with the target language.

In conclusion, our hypothesis is confirmed, and our research questions are answered, underscoring the significant potential of YouTube fandom as an innovative approach to language learning and soft skill development. The alignment of these findings with existing literature reinforces the viability of incorporating digital media into educational frameworks. This emphasizes the need for further research to explore the long-term effects of such practices on learners' linguistic and social competencies.

4. Pedagogical Recommendations

The findings of this study highlight effective strategies for enhancing language education through digital platforms like YouTube fandoms. By incorporating these communities into curricula, educators can create immersive learning experiences that promote authentic language use and cultural engagement. Assignments that encourage exploration and analysis of specific fandoms can align with experiential learning principles, fostering student motivation (Alwehaibi, 2015). Additionally, structured online discussions can improve communication skills while cultivating essential soft skills like collaboration and critical thinking, crucial for academic and professional success (Sauro and Thorne, 2020).

To maximize digital engagement, explicit instruction on digital literacy and communication norms is essential, equipping students to navigate online interactions effectively (Benson, 2019). Encouraging reflective practices, such as journaling and peer feedback, can deepen students' understanding of their skill development, in line with Schön's (1983) model of reflective practice. Ongoing assessment through surveys or portfolios can also help tailor instructional methods to diverse student needs.

5. Limitations of the Study

This study offers valuable insights into integrating YouTube fandoms in language learning; however, several limitations affect the generalizability and depth of the findings. The limited participant pool of eighteen students constrains the robustness of the results, as it may not fully represent the diverse experiences and perspectives of a larger population, which could provide more comprehensive data and enhance reliability. Additionally, the one-month duration of the experiment restricts long-term observations of language and soft skill development due to students' commitments to various courses and exams. Longer studies could yield deeper insights into how sustained interaction impacts learning outcomes and facilitates the integration of newly developed skills. Therefore, while this research contributes to understanding YouTube fandoms as tools for language learning and skill development, future studies should involve larger, more diverse groups and extended engagement periods to capture a fuller picture of how digital fandoms can effectively be utilized in educational contexts.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study underscores the significant role of YouTube fandoms as innovative tools for enhancing language learning and soft skill development in education. Participants reported improvements in a number of language skills, affirming the effectiveness of immersive language exposure. The findings also highlight the development of essential skills, reinforcing the need to integrate contemporary media into teaching practices. Despite limitations such as a small sample size and short experiment duration, this research advocates for further exploration of alternative platforms to enrich engagement. Overall, it contributes to the discourse on the pedagogical value of digital platforms in aligning language education with learners' interests and cultural practices.

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