

SYMBOLISM IN “ELEMENTAL” MOVIE: A GUIDE FOR ENHANCING WRITING SKILLS THROUGH STORY RETELLING

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Abstract: *Developing writing skills remains a persistent challenge in education, particularly when conventional techniques fail to engage students meaningfully. This study investigates the effectiveness of using the animated film “Elemental” as a medium to enhance writing skills through symbolic analysis and story retelling. Grounded in sociocultural learning theory and interpretive anthropology, the study employed a mixed-methods pretest-posttest quasi-experimental design involving twenty tenth-grade students at NU 1 Vocational School Karanggeneng. Students participated in a guided intervention featuring the analysis of symbolic elements in the film, followed by structured story-retelling exercises. Data were collected through pretests and posttests, which were assessed by a symbolic interpretation rubric and analyzed using descriptive statistics, paired samples t-tests, and qualitative content analysis. Quantitative findings showed that students' mean scores improved significantly from 58.90 in the pretest to 80.13 in the posttest, with symbolic understanding achieving the highest improvement at 47.4% ($p < 0.001$). Qualitative analysis revealed enhanced abilities in interpreting symbolic meanings and embedding them creatively into narratives. This study concludes that incorporating symbolic analysis into multimedia-based instruction effectively fosters critical literacy and creative writing skills. Limitations include the small sample size and the relatively short duration of the intervention, suggesting that future research should explore longitudinal impacts and the application of symbolic storytelling strategies across broader educational contexts.*

Keywords: *writing skills, symbolism, elemental movie, story retelling*

INTRODUCTION

In the ever-evolving landscape of education, developing writing skills remains a fundamental challenge and concern for students at different levels of education (AlMarwani, 2020). Writing skills are essential because they are one of the methods through which people interact and exchange information with each other. Crafting good writing presents a significant mental challenge, as it requires the combined use of memory, language skills, and critical thinking (Al Hadad et al., 2024). Writing skills, especially in English, also contribute to other skills. That is why we need to have writing skills. Students need to come up with ideas in their heads to control their thoughts, and students need to experience writing and the experience of writing ideas (Salsabila et al., 2024). It still becomes a problem when the students are dull to learn due to the boring learning techniques (Anwar et al., 2023). To improve writing skills, teachers need to attract students' interest by giving them an understanding and then being able to re-explain it interesting (Sahayu, 2024).

In today's era, students are developing in multimedia-rich situations, frequently considering different data sources and excitement. The swift advancement of technology has transformed education by introducing innovative tools that reshape

traditional teaching and learning practices (Pariyanto & Tungka, 2024). This steady movement contributes to a diminished resilience to boredom, requiring high levels of incitement to preserve the center (Roehling et al., 2010). The intersection of movie media and pedagogy has become a focal point, especially with narrative-oriented animation, which enhances students' motivation and provides a structured approach to story elements, fostering improved comprehension and writing skills. In practical applications, studies have shown that animations tailored to student-friendly content can provide a balanced blend of visual engagement and conceptual understanding, making it an ideal medium for writing exercises in educational settings (Ginting et al., 2019).

The movie 'Elemental' (2023) represents a fascinating case in researching symbolism and narrative techniques of modern storytelling. This movie narrates the story of several elemental groups with their symbol form as water, land, fire, and wind characters in an elemental city, which becomes a newcomer (Devyana & Nugroho, 2024). Symbolism is one of the most important literary devices that make viewing pleasurable. At the same time, storytelling plays an important role in the cognizance of any meaning to be conveyed by a movie (Doston Hamidulla O'g'li, 2024). Symbolism in movies easily helps the audience understand a movie's hidden or implied meanings (Hermanto Sihombing et al., 2022).

Previous studies have reported on the importance of animated movies for teaching. Animation movies have been proven to be effective in many studies for educational purposes, particularly in writing. This study also examined the ability of students to teach by using animated movies. For example, (Irwan & Putra, 2015), this research uses two kinds of treatment, which discuss the comparative writing ability of students who are taught a mixture of conventional therapy and modern media (animation movies). The results prove that there is only a slight change from the average pre-test to the average post-test results for conventional treatment (a difference of 0.25%). In comparison, the change in the average pre-test and post-test results for animation movie media looks more increased (difference of 18.65%). It was concluded that animation movie media was better than conventional treatment. Nonetheless, although these studies emphasize the generalistic use of animated movies in education and the facilitation of writing, knowledge of how some special symbolic features in the current frame of an animated movie, placed with systematic implementation within teaching writing, will remain a challenge. There is still a significant gap in understanding how certain symbolic elements in contemporary animation movies can be systematically used to develop writing skills.

This study seeks to see the use of modern media in education with the movie *Elemental*, which has a symbolic meaning to sharpen the students' ability to construct the story and support students' writing skills. Abbar, (2023) relates stronger student narratives to the ability to identify and critique symbolism in contemporary or modern media.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study utilized a mixed-methods pretest-posttest quasi-experimental design, as conceptualized by (Campbell & Stanley, 1966) The research aimed to enhance the writing skills of tenth-grade students at NU 1 Vocational School Karanggeneng through an innovative approach that combined story retelling with symbolic analysis of the film "Elemental." Twenty students, aged 15 to 16, participated in this educational intervention. The study was theoretically grounded in Vygotsky (1978)'s Sociocultural

learning theory and interpretive anthropology, both of which stress the importance of symbolic understanding as constructed through social interaction, cultural interpretation, and the reconstruction of lived experiences via narrative.

Research Instruments:

Comprehensive research instruments were developed and implemented throughout the study to evaluate the students' progress. The pretest writing assessment employed a Symbolic Interpretation Rubric with a scoring range of 0-100 points. This assessment evaluated three critical dimensions: Narrative Structure (30 points), which examined the students' ability to create coherent storylines; Symbolic Understanding (35 points), which measured their capacity to identify and interpret symbolic elements; and Creative Expression (35 points), which assessed their ability to articulate interpretations in original and insightful ways.

The intervention phase focused on the animated film "Elemental," chosen for its rich symbolic content and thematic complexity. Students engaged with the 101-minute film through guided viewing sessions and structured symbolic analysis activities designed to deepen their understanding of metaphorical representations. The intervention also included guided story retelling sessions, where students practiced reconstructing the narrative while incorporating their symbolic interpretations, thereby linking analytical thinking with creative expression.

After the intervention, students undertook a posttest writing assessment that mirrored the structure of the pretest. This methodological consistency allowed for direct comparative analysis of their progress in symbolic interpretation and narrative construction abilities. The posttest specifically instructed students to craft stories about "Elemental," integrating the symbolic elements they had analyzed during the intervention.

Data Collection:

Data collection was meticulously structured into three sequential phases: Pre-test phase, Intervention phase, and Post-test phase.

1. Phase 1 (Pre-test)

The pretest involved established baseline measurements of the students' symbolic interpretation skills without prior exposure to the film. This initial assessment provided essential comparative data for later analysis.

2. Phase 2 (Intervention)

The intervention encompassed, featuring a film screening and structured symbolic analysis activities facilitated by the researcher. These activities supported the students' understanding of symbolic elements and narrative structures.

3. Phase 3 (Post-test)

The posttest involved which comprehensive assessment of skills development following the educational intervention.

Data Analysis:

The study employed a triangulated approach, combining quantitative and qualitative techniques for data analysis. Descriptive statistics summarized patterns in student performance across both assessments. Paired samples t-tests validated any observable changes in student writing abilities from pretest to posttest. Additionally, qualitative content analysis was conducted on students' written work to identify emerging themes, patterns of symbolic understanding, and evidence of transformative learning that might not be captured through quantitative measures alone. This mixed-methods analytical approach provided a more nuanced understanding of how story

retelling and symbolic analysis influenced students' writing development and interpretive capabilities.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

FINDINGS

Quantitative Findings

The paired samples t-test showed a significant increase in all assessment categories, with symbolic understanding being the largest increase. The average total score increased from 82.1 (Pre-Test) to 47.5 (Post-Test), indicating a significant positive impact (Sig.<.001).

Table 1. Pre-Test and Post-Test Mean Scores of all Assessment Categories

Participant	Pre-Test Mean Score	Post-Test Mean Score
1	57.67	79.00
2	60.00	81.67
3	59.00	80.33
4	57.33	77.67
5	61.00	82.67
6	56.00	76.67
7	62.00	83.67
8	57.67	79.00
9	60.00	81.67
10	59.00	80.33
11	55.00	75.67
12	63.00	84.67
13	57.33	77.67
14	61.00	82.67
15	56.00	76.67
16	62.00	83.67
17	57.67	79.00
18	60.00	81.67
19	59.00	80.33
20	57.33	77.67
	58.90	80.13

Table 2. Category, Mean, and Improvement

Assessment Category	Pre-Test Mean	Post-Test Mean	Improvement (%)	t-value	p-value
Narrative Structure	62.3	78.5	+26.0%	4.73	0.000
Symbolic Understanding	55.7	82.1	+47.4%	5.12	0.000
Creative Expression	59.6	85.3	+43.0%	4.89	0.000

Table 3: Paired Samples Test

		<i>Paired Differences</i>							
		Std. Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	Upper	t	dF	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	Deviation	Mean	Lower				
Pair 1	Pretest - Posttest	-21.23	2.31	0.52	-22.32	-20.14	-40.83	19	0.000

Based on the data, the performance distribution of the students showed significant improvements after the intervention. For high performers, defined as those scoring above 80 points, the number increased dramatically from 2 students (10%) in the pretest to 12 students (60%) in the posttest. Meanwhile, the medium performers, those scoring between 60 and 79 points, slightly decreased from 9 students (45%) in the pretest to 7 students (35%) in the posttest. The most notable change was observed among the low performers, those scoring below 60 points, where the number dropped substantially from 9 students (45%) in the pretest to only 1 student (5%) in the posttest. These results highlight a significant upward shift in student performance.

Qualitative Insights

The qualitative findings demonstrate a notable enhancement in students' interpretive and creative writing skills following the intervention. Students showed an increased ability to recognize and interpret symbolic meanings within the narrative of the movie *Elemental*. Their understanding of abstract concepts improved significantly, allowing for more insightful story reconstructions. Participants could identify symbolic representations and embed these interpretations creatively into their own retellings, indicating a deeper engagement with the material.

Moreover, there was a marked growth in students' narrative comprehension and creative confidence. Many students who initially struggled with abstract or metaphorical ideas developed a more sophisticated approach to storytelling, effectively weaving symbolic elements into their narratives. Their figurative language became more deliberate and contextually appropriate, reflecting a maturation in their expressive abilities. The intervention thus highlighted the importance of multimedia exposure in fostering critical literacy and creative competencies.

DISCUSSION

The interpretation of these findings reveals how integrating symbolic analysis within narrative retelling can significantly enhance students' cognitive and creative development. The substantial improvement observed in symbolic understanding (+47.4%) clearly indicates that structured engagement with symbolic narratives stimulates deeper levels of thought and meaning-making. This outcome addresses a significant gap in previous research, where the focus often remained on basic language acquisition without emphasizing critical interpretive skills. By focusing on symbolism, this study moves beyond surface-level language proficiency and promotes higher-order thinking skills necessary for advanced writing development.

The findings also align with sociocultural learning theory (Vygotsky, 1978), affirming that social and cultural tools, such as movies rich in symbolic content, mediate cognitive growth. Students benefited not only from the guided analysis but

also from the social interaction during discussions, which supported the co-construction of meaning. This collaborative meaning-making process enabled students to internalize and express symbolic concepts through writing. Compared to previous studies that utilized animation merely for engagement, this research provides evidence that targeted symbolic analysis leads to measurable educational outcomes

Furthermore, improving creative expression suggests that symbolic analysis can bridge comprehension and production skills. While earlier studies emphasized using animation to increase student engagement (e.g., Irwan & Putra, 2015) This study advances the conversation by demonstrating that when symbolic content is systematically unpacked, it directly nurtures students' narrative creativity. This shift from passive viewing to active analytical engagement offers new pedagogical insights into designing multimedia-based writing instruction.

Finally, the findings offer important implications for curriculum design. Incorporating media analysis focused on symbolism can diversify instructional strategies and cater to diverse learner needs. The results also encourage educators to rethink the role of popular media in education, positioning it not just as an engagement tool but as a scaffold for building critical literacy. Compared to earlier educational practices that marginalized media use, this study supports a more integrated and purposeful adoption of multimedia resources to enhance students' interpretive and writing skills.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrated that integrating symbolic analysis through story retelling, using the Elemental movie, significantly improved students' writing skills, particularly in narrative structure, symbolic understanding, and creative expression. The intervention allowed students to develop deeper cognitive engagement and a better ability to interpret and express abstract concepts within their writing. The findings affirm that symbolic elements embedded in popular media can effectively scaffold critical thinking and narrative creativity when systematically incorporated into the learning process.

The study contributes valuable insights for educators aiming to enrich writing instruction through multimedia resources, positioning symbolism as an artistic device and a powerful educational tool. However, limitations include the relatively small sample size and the short duration of intervention, which may not capture long-term impacts. Future research could explore longitudinal effects, the application of symbolic analysis across different media genres, or adaptations for diverse educational settings to further validate and extend these findings.

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