



Exploring Transformative Learning in Educational Films and Its Implications for Enhancing English Writing Skills

Safnidar Siahaan

Universitas Muhammadiyah Malang, Indonesia
safnidar@fkip.unrika.ac.id

Akhsanul In'am

Universitas Muhammadiyah Malang, Indonesia
akhsanul@umm.ac.id

Masduki

Universitas Muhammadiyah Malang, Indonesia
masduki@umm.ac.id

Suryo Hartanto

Universitas Muhammadiyah Malang, Indonesia
suryo@fkip.unrika.ac.id

ABSTRACT

This study investigates how the film *Freedom Writers* reflects transformative learning and what it means for improving English writing skills, particularly in EFL environments. The research employs a descriptive qualitative content analysis, treating the film as the sole data source and applying Mezirow's transformative learning theory. Character development, dialogue, and instructional scenarios are used to explore key themes such as confusing problems, critical reflection, and identity transformation. The findings show that cinematic narratives like *Freedom Writers* effectively model reflective writing practices such as journaling, narrative expression, and thematic exploration, which are critical for developing students' personal voice, rhetorical depth, and emotional engagement in writing. Unlike studies that rely on empirical classroom data, this study takes a theory-driven approach, connecting certain scenes to pedagogical practices applicable to EFL training. The analysis demonstrates that emotionally charged films can be used not just as motivational tools, but also as narrative frameworks for structured writing growth. This study adds to the discussion about multimodal learning and identity-based writing teaching by presenting a reproducible approach for

- incorporating educational films into language pedagogy. The findings indicate that film-based learning can significantly improve writing fluency, critical thinking, and learner transformation.
Keywords: Cinema, EFL Writing, Pedagogy, Transformative Learning

Introduction

English writing abilities are essential for global communication and academic achievement, particularly in EFL situations. Nonetheless, across varied educational settings, students frequently struggle to convey nuanced ideas, develop cogent arguments, and engage in analytical narrative writing. These issues are frequently caused by rigid educational paradigms that promote syntax and formulaic writing above personal voice, critical thinking, and creative discovery. To solve this, scientists and educators have increasingly resorted to multimodal, humanistic techniques, particularly the use of cinema as a stimulus and scaffold for learning. In this shifting pedagogical landscape, the 2007 film *Freedom Writers*, based on a true incident, stands out as a riveting case study. The film depicts a group of disenfranchised kids who improve their writing abilities and personal agency through narrative, reflection, and relational pedagogy, all of which are hallmarks of transformative learning, as defined by Jack Mezirow (Mezirow, 1991; Baumgartner, 2019; Eschenbacher, 2020)

Freedom Writers depicts Erin Gruwell's pedagogical journey, as a high school teacher who uses journaling, discussion, and documentary storytelling to help students transform their identities and achieve writing fluency. This cinematic story is consistent with transformative learning theory, which holds that important learning occurs through confusing challenges, critical reflection, and viewpoint transformation (Siahaan et al., 2024; Hosen, 2022). For the students in the film, who first perceive little value in academic writing, documenting their real experiences becomes a vehicle for reclaiming agency, self-worth, and purpose, as well as for linguistic expression. These issues resonate with EFL students, who frequently experience identity dissonance, confidence gaps, and linguistic unease. The emotional and cognitive alterations depicted in the film provide a rich foundation for investigating how cinema might foster transformative experiences that have a direct impact on students' writing development.

The instructional benefit of film in EFL courses has been well documented. Films provide a multisensory medium that promotes emotional connection, contextualizes authentic language use, and encourages introspective cognition (Agustin & Yana, 2024; Esmail & Matthews-Roper, 2022; Shavkatovna et al., 2024). Studies undertaken in Indonesia, Egypt, and Turkey show that when films are combined with structured reflection and journaling assignments, they result in measurable increases in writing fluency, narrative structure, and rhetorical awareness (Abdel-Haq et al., 2019; Deveci, 2014; Manson et al., 2010). Furthermore, educational narratives such as *The Ron Clark Story* and *Taare Zameen Par* have been used to investigate the intersections of identity, emotion, and cognition in writing instruction, demonstrating how students become co-authors of meaning when empowered by film-based learning (Hosen, 2022; Siahaan et al., 2024). Despite the growing interest in film-based education, little empirical research has been conducted to examine how films such as *Freedom Writers* operationalize transformational learning in ways that promote specific advances in writing ability.

- This analysis highlights numerous significant gaps in the literature. While numerous studies have shown that film has motivational benefits for language learners, few directly link cinematic experiences to Mezirow's basic concepts, such as critical self-reflection, unsettling dilemmas, or changed meaning views (Eschenbacher, 2020; Nagata, 2006). Furthermore, there is sometimes a lack of pedagogical specialization in current studies. While many educators report success with cinema, few have documented explicit instructional frameworks that link film viewing with targeted writing tasks, peer interaction, and recursive reflection. Furthermore, most research focuses on basic narrative writing among younger EFL learners. The transformative benefits of cinema on promoting more difficult genres—such as analytical, argumentative, or autobiographical writing—among intermediate to advanced learners are mostly unknown (Kuiper, 2017; Duckworth & Smith, 2018). These gaps underscore the need for more research into how emotionally captivating films like *Freedom Writers* can motivate students while also catalyzing substantial changes in their writing processes, self-perception, and linguistic confidence.

This study addresses that requirement by undertaking a descriptive qualitative content analysis of *Freedom Writers*, which examines how the film depicts transformational learning processes and how these representations might inform EFL writing teaching. By examining character development, dialogue, thematic elements, and crucial pedagogical moments, the study analyzes the film as a theoretical and instructional resource. Unlike empirical studies involving students or teachers, this study considers the film as a standalone text, providing a narrative model for developing reflection, identity work, and voice through writing.

This study is significant because it makes an interdisciplinary contribution to transformational learning theory in language education, uses educational video as reflective practice, and conceptualizes writing as identity development. The analysis, based on *Freedom Writers*, demonstrates how film may be used to analyze personal growth, language development, and self-expression. Finally, this study portrays instructional film not only as a classroom help, but also as a strong narrative medium that exemplifies the transformational power of writing. In light of this, the study answers the following research question: How does the film *Freedom Writers* reflect transformative learning, and what does it mean for improving English writing skills?

Methods

This study uses a descriptive qualitative content analysis to investigate how the film *Freedom Writers* reflects transformative learning and what it means for improving English writing skills. The analysis focuses on specific situations, conversations, and classroom interactions in which students practice reflective writing, journaling, and narrative expression. Data collection entails transcribing relevant film segments and categorizing them into predetermined themes such as critical reflection, perspective transformation, and authentic language use, using Mezirow's transformative learning framework and previous pedagogical research (Lestari & Asiyah, 2018). The coding procedure follows Miles et al., (2014) flow model, which includes data reduction (extracting significant scenes), data display (organizing extracts into thematic matrices), and conclusion drawing (interpreting patterns). To establish validity, the study uses

▪triangulation, which involves comparing findings to previous research on movie-based learning (Karimaliana et al., 2023). The goal of this method is to capture not only the theoretical aspects of transformational learning but also its practical manifestations in English writing teaching, resulting in a real-world pedagogical model that can be critically reviewed and imitated.

Findings

The descriptive qualitative content analysis of Freedom Writers reveals a rich representation of transformational learning, which has important implications for improving English writing skills. The film illustrates important components of Mezirow's transformative learning theory through selected scenarios, dialogues, and instructional moments, including confusing situations, critical reflection, viewpoint transformation, and the reinvention of identity through written expression. It can be seen in the following explanation.

1. Disorienting Dilemmas and Emotional Engagement

Several situations in the film show the presence of unsettling challenges that serve as catalysts for change. For example, the pupils' exposure to the Holocaust through The Diary of Anne Frank upends their worldview and forces them to reconsider personal and societal preconceptions. This key moment, as evidenced by their extreme emotional reactions and subsequent journal entries, mirrors Mezirow's description of a transformative entry point in which learners face an emotionally charged challenge that shakes their past views. The cinematic depiction implies that processing such difficulties through writing might result in deep cognitive engagement and sympathetic awareness, both of which are necessary for meaningful written expression. It can be seen for the following script data:

Ms. Gruwell:	"You don't know anything about what these kids go through. You don't understand."
Eva (Journal entry):	"I hate white people. I see white teachers who think they're better than me."
Marcus (after Holocaust museum trip):	"That was the first time I ever felt like someone else had it as bad as us."

These extracts depict the pupils' encounters with perplexing choices, particularly after learning about the Holocaust. Their emotional responses in class discussions and journals reflect a reevaluation of their views and identities in light of larger human suffering. These disturbing realizations promote self-reflection and emotional engagement, which are essential catalysts for transformative learning and richer, more compassionate writing.

2. Critical Reflection and Voice through Journaling

Journaling is a constant and significant motif throughout the film. Erin Gruwell introduces personal journals as a way for students to explore their emotions, trauma, and goals. The process of journaling encourages critical thought, as characters such as Eva, Andre, and Marcus begin to rethink their earlier decisions and rebuild their self-concept

through narrative. These diary excerpts, dramatized with voice-over narration, show how personal writing can become a forum for intellectual and emotional exploration. This underscores the idea that reflective writing can be used not only for therapeutic purposes, but also to enhance rhetorical awareness and narrative structure—both of which are necessary components of writing competency in EFL situations. It can be seen from the following dialogue:

Ms. Gruwell:	"This is your own book. It's a place for you to write whatever you want."
Eva (reading her journal):	"My father gave me the gun. He said, 'If someone disrespects you, you make them bleed.'"
Andre (Journal):	"I never thought my words would mean anything. But writing this made me think."

In the film, journaling is employed for both emotional release and analytical investigation of prior experiences. As students examine their personal histories, they begin to recreate their identities through narratives, which is consistent with Mezirow's emphasis on critical reflection. These introspective compositions provide a platform for students to convey deeper concepts, supporting intellectual and emotional development through writing.

3. Perspective Transformation and Identity Reformation

As the students continue their reflective activities, the film depicts gradual changes in their behavior, confidence, and attitudes about writing. Scenes when pupils learn to regard themselves as talented, valuable, and intellectually engaged individuals show a shift in perspective. For example, when students read each other's journals or give public speeches about their experiences, their internal improvement is outwardly acknowledged. These situations demonstrate that EFL learners' writing skills can be considerably improved when writing is based on identity work, helping them to uncover their voice and agency. It can be seen for the following script data:

Marcus (public reading):	"When I was young, I thought being in a gang would protect me. Now I see I was scared to be myself."
Ms. Gruwell (to class):	"You all have something to say. Your stories matter."
Student dialogue:	"Writing used to be boring. Now I feel like someone's finally listening."

These remarks demonstrate how kids' self-perception shifts from victim or outsider to empowered persons with valid tales. They feel validated and empowered when they share their writing with the public. This shift in perspective represents a watershed moment in transformation, demonstrating how writing becomes a tool for self-discovery and meaningful communication.

4. Authentic Language Use in Contextual Learning

The educational environment shown in Freedom Writers values real-world relevance and emotional authenticity in language use. Instead of conventional grammar drills, students write about their real-life experiences, tackling subjects like racism,

violence, loss, and hope. This move from decontextualized education to meaningful communication aligns with current pedagogical research, which emphasizes real tasks (Agustin & Yana, 2024; Esmail & Matthews-Roper, 2022). The film shows how emotional engagement, contextual understanding, and audience awareness help to increase writing fluency and depth. It can be seen for the following script data:

Ms. Gruwell:	"Write about what's real to you. What makes you angry? What scares you?"
Student writing:	"Last night, I heard gunshots. My little brother cried himself to sleep."
Ms. Gruwell (reading aloud):	"This is poetry. This is truth."

Students are encouraged to write about real-life events in their own voices, rather than textbook themes. This strategy encourages emotional depth and relevance, allowing students to use language in meaningful circumstances. As a result, students create more fluid, logical, and impactful writing that goes beyond mechanical correctness.

5. Pedagogical Implications for EFL Writing Instruction

Although the film does not feature a regular EFL classroom, the practices demonstrated—journaling, storytelling, open dialogue, and thematic writing—provide transferable insights into English writing education. The students' narrative arc parallels frequent trajectories for EFL learners who struggle with motivation, confidence, and voice. Thus, the film serves as a narrative model for educators to study and use when developing reflective, student-centered writing curriculum based on transformative learning. It can be seen for the following script data:

Ms. Gruwell:	"We're going to publish your stories in a book."
Student:	"No one ever cared about what we had to say before."
Class scene:	Students peer-reviewing each other's journal entries with discussion and feedback.

While Freedom Writers' classroom is not an EFL context, the methods used—journaling, peer criticism, and narrative development—are directly transferable to EFL pedagogy. Reflective and collaborative writing exercises are structured in a way that matches tactics for developing confidence and fluency in second language learners. These scenes provide a realistic foundation for developing writing instruction based on personal voice, collaborative reflection, and identity development.

Discussion

The outcomes of this study support and build on previous research arguing for the incorporation of cinema into English language education, notably in fostering transformative learning and improving writing abilities. This study examines Freedom Writers as a cultural and educational text to show how cinematic narratives can incorporate essential characteristics of Mezirow's theory—disorienting problems, critical reflection, and viewpoint transformation. In keeping with Agustin and Yana (2024), who discovered that folktale films improve students' storytelling ability, this study

▪ demonstrates that *Freedom Writers* promotes emotional involvement and introspective depth, both of which are necessary for personal and expressive writing. Furthermore, it expands on the work of Siahaan et al. (2024) and Hosen (2022), who investigated similar themes in educational films, by systematically mapping scenes in *Freedom Writers* to transformative learning components and demonstrating how such depictions symbolically reflect shifts in identity, agency, and voice during the writing process.

Unlike previous studies that treated films primarily as motivational tools (Deveci, 2014; Esmail & Matthews-Roper, 2022), this study offers a more structured pedagogical interpretation, demonstrating how reflective techniques—such as journaling, discussion, and feedback—can transform cinematic experiences into tangible improvements in coherence, rhetorical control, and expressive fluency. It also challenges the view that film-based pedagogy is only applicable to beginner-level learners or limited to narrative writing tasks. This study's content analysis reveals how emotionally impacting experiences, such as a visit to the Holocaust museum, can motivate intermediate learners to participate in analytical and argumentative writing that incorporates higher-order thinking such as moral reasoning and cultural critique. Thus, this study not only supports the pedagogical benefits of educational film, but it also challenges and expands on current literature by proposing a replicable instructional strategy based on transformational learning theory and cinema narratives.

Conclusion

This study finds that *Freedom Writers*, when viewed through the lens of Mezirow's transformative learning theory, demonstrates how cinematic narratives can be successful educational models for improving English writing skills in EFL environments. By focusing solely on the film as a data source, this study shows that reflective elements embedded in the storyline, such as journaling, disorienting dilemmas, and identity reconstruction, provide a powerful framework for developing personal voice, rhetorical depth, and critical thinking in writing. Unlike previous research that focused on student emotions or classroom outcomes, this analysis takes a methodical, theory-driven approach that clearly connects film content to transformative learning principles. The findings support the use of instructional films not only as motivating aids, but also as deliberate instruments for fostering greater cognitive and emotional engagement in writing training. As a result, this study provides educators and curriculum designers with a replicable strategy for incorporating cinema into EFL pedagogy as a means of promoting both language proficiency and learner transformation.

References

- Abdel-Haq, E. M., Al-Hadi, T. M., & Mohammad, S. G. (2019). A Transformative Learning- Based Strategy for Developing Critical Reflection and Reflective Writing Skills of Secondary School EFL Students. *Egypt's Presidential Specialized Council for Education and Scientific Research*, 30(2), 1–39. <https://doi.org/10.21608/jfeb.2019.61316>
- Agustin, D. T., & Yana, P. R. (2024). Enhancing Students' Narrative Writing Skills through Folktale Films. *Tapis : Jurnal Penelitian Ilmiah*, 8(1), Article 1. <https://doi.org/10.32332/tapis.v8i1.8751>
- Baumgartner, L. M. (2019). Fostering Transformative Learning in Educational Settings. *ADULT LITERACY EDUCATION*, 1(1), 69–74. <https://doi.org/10.35847//LBAumgartner.11.69>
- Deveci, T. (2014). *The Transformative Learning Experiences of Learners of English as a Foreign Language at a University Preparatory Programme*. 7(3), 1–19.
- Duckworth, V., & Smith, R. (2018). Breaking the triple lock: Further education and transformative teaching and learning. *Education + Training*, 60(2), 529-543. <https://doi.org/10.1108/ET-05-2018-0111>
- Eschenbacher, S. (2020). Transformative learning and the hidden dynamics of transformation. *Reflective Practice*, 21(6), 759. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14623943.2020.1821631>
- Esmail, S., & Matthews-Roper, M. (2022). Lights, Camera, Reaction: Evaluating Extent of Transformative Learning and Emotional Engagement Through Viewer-Responses to Environmental Films. *Frontiers in Education*, 7, 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2022.836988>
- Hosen, M. D. (2022). Transformative Pedagogy in the Film Taare Zameen Par: An Empirical Analysis under the Light of Transformative Learning Theory. *International Journal of Social Science Studies*, 10(3), 80–80. <https://doi.org/10.11114/ijsss.v10i3.5531>
- Karimaliana, K., Ramadhan, S., & Mukhaiyar, M. (2023). Transformative Literacy Training for English Students: The Impact of Movie-Based Learning Methods. *Voices of English Language Education Society*, 7(3), Article 3. <https://doi.org/10.29408/veles.v7i3.24296>
- Kuiper, K. (2017). Reflection, Writing, and Transformative Learning for College Teachers. *Journal of Transformative Learning*, 4(2), Article 2. <https://jotl.uco.edu/index.php/jotl/article/view/182>
- Lestari, E. E. P., & Asiyah, N. (2018). An analysis of teaching techniques and values found in the “freedom writers” directed by richard lagravenese. *SciSpace - Paper*. <https://scispace.com/papers/an-analysis-of-teaching-techniques-and-values-found-in-the-2ilkdivvt5>
- Manson, B., Poitras, E., & Hong, Y.-J. (2010). Enhancing Language Skills and Fostering Perspective Transformation in Adult ESL Education: A Transformative Learning Approach. *Adult Education Research Conference*. <https://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2010/papers/47>
- Mezirow, J. (1991). *Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning*. Jossey-Bass Higher and Adult Education Series. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED353469>

- Miles, M. B., Huberman, A. M., & Saldaña, J. (2014). *Qualitative data analysis: A methods sourcebook* (Third edition). SAGE Publications, Inc.
- Nagata, A. L. (2006). Transformative Learning in Intercultural Education. *SciSpace - Paper*, 4(4), 39~60.
- Shavkatovna, D. K., Hashim, H., & Jamaludin, K. A. (2024). Mobile Learning for Transforming English Writing Skills: A Systematic Review (2013–2023). *International Journal of Interactive Mobile Technologies (iJIM)*, 18(19), Article 19. <https://doi.org/10.3991/ijim.v18i19.47729>
- Siahaan, S., Eriyanti, R. W., & Asih, R. A. (2024). TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING THROUGH DISORIENTING DILEMMAS AND CRITICAL REFLECTION IN A MOVIE THE RON CLARK STORY. *Language Literacy: Journal of Linguistics, Literature, and Language Teaching*, 8(1), Article 1. <https://doi.org/10.30743/ll.v8i1.9451>