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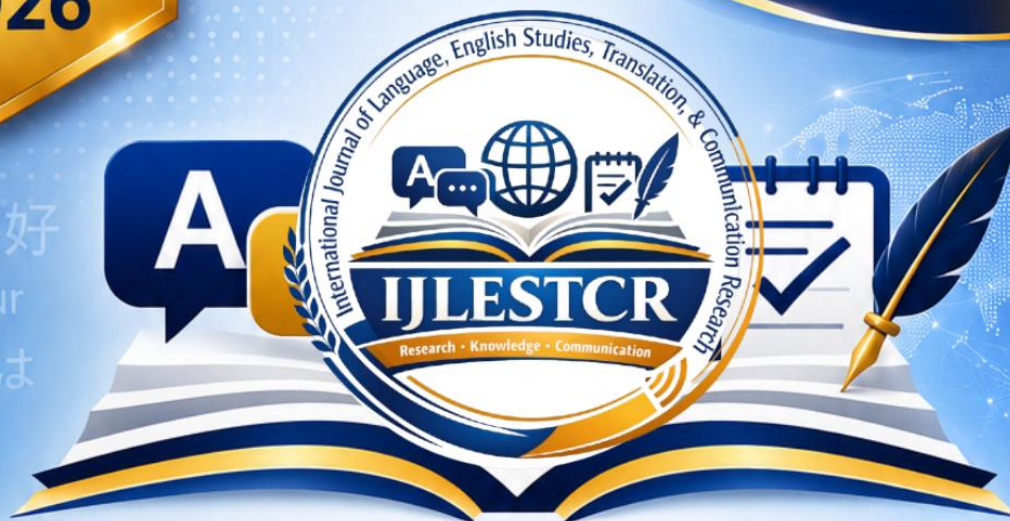
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Comprehending foreign films: Decoding semiotics of meaning through visual codes

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Abstract

Aim: This study explored the lived experiences of Filipino English major students in interpreting visual codes while viewing selected foreign films without subtitles. Specifically, it examined the visual codes participants noticed, how they experienced and interpreted these codes, how visual codes contributed to film comprehension and meaning construction, and how cultural backgrounds and personal experiences shaped their interpretations.

Method: A qualitative phenomenological approach was employed. Six English major students from UM Tagum College who had firsthand experience watching foreign films without subtitles participated in individual, in-depth, semi-structured interviews. Purposive sampling was used to select participants based on their experiential relevance to the phenomenon. Data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis, with the analysis grounded primarily in participants' descriptions of their lived experiences.

Results: Five experiential themes emerged: Colors, Imagery/Pictures, Lighting, Camera Angles, and Symbolism. Participants described these visual codes as interconnected cues that helped them infer emotions, understand characters and relationships, identify settings, anticipate narrative developments, and construct meaning when spoken dialogue was not fully understood. Participants also described drawing on their cultural backgrounds, prior experiences, and existing knowledge when interpreting visual codes, resulting in meanings that were not necessarily universal or fixed.

Conclusion: The findings indicate that subtitle-free viewing of foreign films involved an active process of visual meaning-making in which participants relied on visual codes and connected them with their personal and cultural experiences. Visual codes functioned as important resources for narrative comprehension and interpretation when spoken language was not fully accessible. The study highlights the value of understanding visual meaning-making as a situated and experiential process across linguistic and cultural boundaries.

Keywords: *foreign films, visual semiotics, subtitle-free viewing, lived experiences, meaning-making*

INTRODUCTION

Foreign films are films produced in countries other than the viewers' own and are often presented in languages that differ from the viewers' native language. Beyond entertainment, foreign films provide opportunities for viewers to encounter different languages, cultures, perspectives, and forms of visual expression. As audiovisual media communicate through both verbal and visual modes, viewers may construct meaning not only from spoken language but also from images, gestures, facial expressions, settings, colors, lighting, camera angles, and symbolic objects. In this context, visual semiotics provides a useful perspective for understanding how viewers interpret signs and construct meaning from what they see. Films function as multimodal forms of communication in which visual and auditory elements work together, making visual literacy an important component of communication competence.

The increasing accessibility of international films through digital media has expanded opportunities for viewers to encounter audiovisual content from different linguistic and cultural contexts. Within the broader context of globalization, films have become accessible across geographical and cultural boundaries, allowing audiences to engage with representations of identities, social practices, values, and cultural experiences that may differ from their own. The combination of auditory and visual information can support comprehension because viewers can draw upon multiple sources of information when constructing meaning (Shaojie et al., 2022). When spoken language is unfamiliar or not fully understood, visual information may become particularly important because viewers can attend to observable cues



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to infer emotions, relationships, settings, actions, and possible developments in the narrative. Thus, viewing foreign films without subtitles provides a distinctive context in which audiences may rely more heavily on visual information to negotiate meaning across linguistic boundaries.

In the Philippine context, the accessibility of foreign audiovisual content has likewise increased opportunities for learners to encounter diverse languages and cultures. Foreign films may serve as resources for language learning, intercultural awareness, visual literacy, and critical engagement with media. Previous research has established the educational value of audiovisual input, particularly in relation to second-language learning and comprehension. For example, Montero Perez (2022) reported that audiovisual input can support second-language learning, while Muñoz et al. (2023) provided further evidence of the contribution of audiovisual materials to language learning. These studies demonstrate that audiovisual materials can provide learners with meaningful linguistic and contextual information. However, much of this body of research has examined audiovisual input from the perspectives of language acquisition, vocabulary learning, comprehension, and the use of on-screen text. Such findings establish the broader educational value of audiovisual materials but do not fully explain how viewers construct meaning from visual information when linguistic assistance from subtitles is unavailable.

This distinction is important because viewing a foreign film without subtitles places viewers in a different meaning-making situation. Without translated text to directly support linguistic comprehension, viewers may attend more closely to visual codes and use them together with their prior knowledge, personal experiences, and cultural understanding to interpret what they see. Facial expressions, gestures, body movements, colors, lighting, camera perspectives, settings, objects, and other symbolic elements may serve as contextual resources through which viewers infer emotions, relationships, intentions, and narrative developments. However, the meanings attributed to such visual codes may not always be universal. A visual sign that appears meaningful to one viewer may be interpreted differently by another depending on cultural background, previous experiences, and familiarity with particular social or cultural conventions. Consequently, understanding foreign films without subtitles involves not simply recognizing visual elements but also experiencing, interpreting, and negotiating their meanings within particular cultural and personal contexts.

Although existing scholarship has examined visual semiotics, audiovisual communication, and the role of audiovisual materials in language learning, there remains a need for greater empirical attention to the lived experiences of viewers who interpret foreign films without subtitles. In particular, limited attention has been given to how viewers experience visual codes when spoken dialogue is not fully accessible, how they personally interpret these visual signs, how they use visual information to make sense of characters and narrative situations, and how their cultural backgrounds and personal experiences shape their interpretations. This gap is especially relevant in educational contexts where learners encounter foreign audiovisual materials and must draw upon multiple forms of information to construct meaning. Examining these experiences can contribute to a deeper understanding of visual meaning-making across linguistic and cultural boundaries.

The present study therefore focuses on the lived experiences of Filipino English major students in interpreting visual codes while viewing selected foreign film excerpts without subtitles. Specifically, the study explores the visual codes that participants notice, how they experience and interpret these codes in making sense of characters, emotions, settings, and narrative situations, how visual codes contribute to their comprehension and construction of meaning when spoken dialogue is not fully understood, and how their cultural backgrounds and personal experiences shape or vary their interpretations. By placing participants' experiences at the center of inquiry, the study approaches visual semiotics not merely as a system of predetermined symbols but as a process through which viewers actively construct and negotiate meaning. The findings may contribute to scholarship on visual literacy, intercultural communication, language education, and media studies by providing phenomenological insights into how viewers make sense of foreign films when subtitles are not available.

Review of Related Literature and Studies

Visual Semiotics and Peircean Meaning-Making

Semiotics provides a theoretical basis for understanding how meaning is constructed through signs. In the context of visual communication, signs may be expressed through images, colors, gestures, spatial arrangements, objects, and other perceptible forms that viewers interpret within particular contexts. Peircean semiotics is particularly relevant because it conceptualizes meaning through the relationship among the representamen, object, and interpretant. From this perspective, a visual element does not simply contain a fixed meaning; rather, meaning emerges through the relationship between the observable sign, what it refers to, and the interpretation produced by the viewer. Kilstrup (2015) explains the triadic character of Peircean sign processes as a relational system in which signs acquire



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significance through their connections to objects and interpretants. This perspective is particularly useful for the present study because participants were asked to describe how they experienced and interpreted visual elements rather than to identify predetermined meanings assigned to those elements.

The distinction between the triadic elements of the sign and the classification of signs as icons, indexes, and symbols is also important in interpreting visual communication. Icons, indexes, and symbols describe different relationships between signs and their objects, whereas representamen, object, and interpretant describe the broader relational process through which semiotic meaning is constructed. In film viewing, a visual image may therefore function as a recognizable representation, an indication of a situation, or a culturally learned symbol, while its meaning ultimately depends on the interpretive activity of the viewer. Such a perspective allows visual signs to be examined without assuming that their meanings are universally fixed.

Visual semiotics is particularly relevant to contemporary media because viewers increasingly encounter meaning through multimodal forms rather than through language alone. Digital media combine images, movement, spatial composition, sound, written language, and other representational resources. Lavrenova (2025) emphasizes the density of sign systems within contemporary visual environments, suggesting that viewers must engage with multiple layers of meaning when interpreting visual representations. This broader semiotic perspective provides a foundation for examining how learners interpret visual elements in foreign films when linguistic information is not fully accessible.

Film Semiotics and Visual Codes

Film is a multimodal form of communication in which meaning is constructed through the interaction of visual, auditory, spatial, and narrative elements. Cinematic techniques such as camera angle, framing, lighting, color, composition, movement, setting, and the positioning of characters can provide information about emotions, relationships, power, atmosphere, and narrative developments. These elements may therefore function as visual codes through which viewers organize and interpret what they see.

The significance of visual codes lies not only in their presence but also in the way viewers connect them to the unfolding narrative. A low-angle camera perspective, for example, may be experienced as suggesting dominance or power, while changes in lighting may be associated with shifts in mood or atmosphere. Colors and objects may likewise become meaningful when viewers connect them with characters, events, emotions, or cultural associations. Such interpretations should not automatically be treated as universal cinematic meanings because viewers may draw upon different cultural experiences and prior knowledge when interpreting the same visual element.

Dewanti (2023), in discussing Saussurean semiotics, emphasizes that signs acquire meaning within relationships and systems rather than functioning as isolated entities. Applied to film viewing, this perspective suggests that the meaning of a visual element may depend on its relationship with other signs and with the larger scene. Thus, the interpretation of a color, object, gesture, or camera technique may change depending on the surrounding narrative context. This supports the present study's emphasis on participants' descriptions of how visual codes were experienced within particular scenes rather than on assigning universal meanings to individual cinematic techniques.

Audiovisual Communication and Comprehension

Audiovisual materials provide viewers with multiple sources of information that can operate simultaneously during comprehension. Unlike written texts that primarily depend on linguistic information, audiovisual materials combine speech, images, movement, sound, spatial relations, and other contextual cues. Montero Perez (2022) describes audiovisual input as inherently multimodal and notes that research on audiovisual learning has examined both comprehension and the role of on-screen text. This multimodal nature of audiovisual input is particularly relevant to foreign-language viewing because viewers may use information from different channels when linguistic comprehension is incomplete.

Research on audiovisual input has also demonstrated that visual and auditory information can contribute to language learning and comprehension. Muñoz et al. (2023) examined audiovisual input in relation to second-language vocabulary and grammatical learning and considered the effects of subtitles, captions, and learner proficiency. Their findings demonstrate the importance of examining audiovisual input as more than spoken language alone because learners interact with multiple information sources while viewing audiovisual materials.

More recent evidence further demonstrates the educational relevance of audiovisual materials. Sutton and Webb (2026) conducted a meta-analysis of 56 experiments involving 1,954 participants and found a positive overall effect of audiovisual input on second-language learning, while also identifying differences according to the type of audiovisual material used. These findings strengthen the broader argument that audiovisual materials can provide meaningful learning resources. However, most audiovisual-learning research focuses on language outcomes such as



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vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, speaking, or listening. Less attention has been given to the lived experience of viewers who construct meaning from visual information when linguistic assistance is reduced or unavailable.

Subtitles, Captions, and Subtitle-Free Viewing

Subtitles and captions are important components of audiovisual language learning because they provide linguistic information that can support comprehension. Montero Perez (2022) reviewed research concerning different forms of on-screen text and their relationship to second- and foreign-language learning. The review indicates that subtitles and captions can influence how learners process audiovisual input and can provide additional linguistic support while viewing. Muñoz et al. (2023) likewise examined differences associated with subtitles and captions and included a condition in which learners viewed audiovisual material without captions.

Although these studies demonstrate the importance of on-screen text, subtitle-free viewing represents a distinct viewing condition. When subtitles are unavailable, viewers cannot depend on translated written language to directly clarify unfamiliar dialogue. They may therefore attend more closely to facial expressions, gestures, body movements, settings, objects, colors, lighting, camera perspectives, and other contextual information. This does not mean that viewers completely understand the spoken language or that visual information replaces linguistic comprehension. Rather, visual information may function as a complementary resource through which viewers infer what may be happening in the scene.

The distinction between subtitle-supported and subtitle-free viewing is therefore important for the present study. Existing audiovisual-learning literature has provided substantial evidence concerning the role of subtitles and captions, but comparatively less attention has been directed toward how viewers personally experience the process of constructing meaning when subtitles are absent. The present study addresses this issue by focusing specifically on the visual codes that Filipino English major students notice and interpret during subtitle-free foreign-film viewing.

Visual Literacy and the Interpretation of Visual Texts

The increasing use of audiovisual and digital media has expanded the importance of visual literacy. Visual literacy involves more than simply seeing images; it includes the ability to attend to visual information, interpret its possible meanings, recognize relationships among visual elements, and critically reflect on how meaning is communicated. Farrar et al. (2024), in their review of research on visual literacy, identify visual reading as an area involving aesthetic, intercultural, empathic, and ethical dimensions. Their review also emphasizes the importance of examining how readers respond to and interpret visual texts rather than treating visual meaning as purely objective.

This perspective is relevant to film viewing because films provide complex visual texts in which meaning is distributed across multiple elements. Viewers must attend not only to what characters say but also to what characters do, how they are positioned, what objects surround them, how scenes are illuminated, and how camera perspectives organize attention. Visual literacy therefore provides an educational dimension to the present study: understanding how learners interpret visual codes may help explain how they make sense of audiovisual materials when linguistic information is incomplete.

For English major students, visual literacy may be particularly relevant because language learning increasingly occurs through multimodal texts. Foreign films expose learners to language and culture while simultaneously requiring them to interpret visual and contextual information. The ability to analyze these multiple modes can support more critical engagement with audiovisual materials. However, visual literacy should not be understood as the ability to identify one correct meaning for every visual sign. Instead, interpretation may involve considering context, cultural knowledge, prior experience, and alternative meanings.

Nonverbal Communication and Visual Cues in Film

Nonverbal communication provides another important dimension of visual meaning-making. Facial expressions, gestures, posture, body movement, interpersonal distance, and other visible behaviors can communicate emotional and relational information even when spoken language is not fully understood. In audiovisual narratives, these cues operate together with cinematic techniques such as camera angle, lighting, framing, and setting. Viewers may therefore use several visual resources simultaneously when attempting to understand a character or situation.

The present study considers such nonverbal behaviors as visual cues within broader thematic categories rather than treating every visible behavior as an independent theme. Facial expressions and gestures, for example, may occur together with color, lighting, or camera perspective to create a particular emotional impression. This supports the view that visual meaning in film is relational and contextual rather than produced by isolated elements.

Such an approach is consistent with the multimodal character of audiovisual communication described by Montero Perez (2022). Because audiovisual texts provide several channels of information at the same time, viewers



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may combine linguistic, visual, and contextual information while constructing meaning. When subtitles are absent and dialogue is unfamiliar, the relative attention given to visible cues may become particularly important to the viewer's interpretation.

Cross-Cultural Interpretation of Visual Signs

Visual meaning is also influenced by culture. Although some visual cues may appear easily recognizable, the meanings associated with colors, gestures, objects, clothing, settings, and symbolic representations may vary across cultural contexts. A sign that is associated with one emotion, value, social practice, or cultural idea in one context may carry a different meaning in another. Consequently, cross-cultural film viewing requires viewers to negotiate meanings that may not correspond directly to the conventions with which they are familiar.

Ting-Toomey and Chung (2022) emphasize the role of cultural perspectives in intercultural communication and the ways in which individuals interpret communication within culturally informed frameworks. Applied to foreign-film viewing, this perspective suggests that viewers do not approach audiovisual materials as culturally neutral observers. They bring expectations, knowledge, experiences, and assumptions that may influence what they notice and how they interpret it.

The cultural dimension is especially important in subtitle-free viewing because the absence of translated dialogue may increase the importance of contextual interpretation. Participants may rely on visual cues to infer social relationships, emotions, settings, and narrative intentions, but their interpretations may be shaped by what they already know. Thus, the same visual element may produce different interpretations among viewers. This possibility reinforces the need to investigate visual meaning-making from the perspective of the viewers themselves rather than assuming universal interpretations.

Foreign-Language Film Viewing and Meaning Construction

Foreign-language films provide a particularly useful context for examining multimodal meaning-making because viewers may encounter linguistic forms that are unfamiliar or only partially understood. In such situations, comprehension can involve the integration of available linguistic and visual information. Research on audiovisual input has generally demonstrated the value of video for second-language learning and comprehension, but the literature has focused more heavily on measurable learning outcomes and the effects of subtitles or captions than on the subjective experience of interpreting visual codes during subtitle-free viewing (Montero Perez, 2022; Muñoz et al., 2023).

The present study therefore treats foreign-film viewing as an interpretive activity rather than simply as exposure to language. Participants encounter scenes in which visual elements provide contextual information about characters, settings, actions, emotions, and possible narrative developments. When dialogue is not fully accessible, participants may draw upon these visual resources to construct tentative understandings of what is occurring. Their interpretations may then be revised as additional visual and narrative information becomes available.

This process also suggests that comprehension is not necessarily equivalent to complete linguistic understanding. A viewer may form an interpretation of a character's emotion, relationship, or situation without understanding every spoken utterance. Such partial and evolving comprehension is important to investigate because it reveals how viewers use multiple forms of evidence to negotiate meaning during audiovisual encounters.

Phenomenological Approaches to Film and Media Viewing

A phenomenological perspective is appropriate when the research interest concerns how people experience a phenomenon rather than merely how the phenomenon can be objectively categorized. In film and media studies, phenomenological approaches focus attention on spectators' lived experiences, including perception, attention, emotion, embodiment, and the ways viewers experience films as they unfold over time.

Recent work has demonstrated the value of empirical phenomenology in film and media research. Boer (2025) proposed an empirical phenomenological approach that examines spectators' lived experiences through detailed descriptions of film viewing, including embodied, affective, and attentional dimensions. The approach emphasizes returning attention to spectators themselves and examining how they experience audiovisual works rather than focusing exclusively on the film as an object of formal analysis.

This perspective closely corresponds to the purpose of the present study. The researchers are not primarily attempting to determine the objectively correct meaning of colors, camera angles, lighting, or symbols in foreign films. Instead, the study seeks to understand how participants themselves experienced these visual elements, what they noticed, what meanings they associated with them, and how they used these cues while attempting to comprehend scenes without subtitles. The phenomenological orientation therefore places participants' accounts at the center of the analysis.



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Prior Knowledge, Personal Experience, and Cultural Background

Meaning-making is also shaped by the knowledge and experiences that viewers bring to the viewing situation. When encountering unfamiliar audiovisual content, viewers may use previous experiences, cultural knowledge, expectations, and familiarity with particular visual conventions to interpret what they see. This means that interpretation is not produced exclusively by the film itself; it emerges from an interaction between the audiovisual stimulus and the viewer's interpretive resources.

This perspective is particularly relevant to foreign films because the visual conventions, social practices, symbols, and narrative contexts represented in the film may differ from those familiar to the viewer. A participant may recognize a visual element immediately because of previous exposure to similar cultural representations, while another participant may require additional contextual information before constructing an interpretation. Consequently, differences in interpretation should not automatically be treated as errors. They may instead reflect differences in cultural knowledge, personal experience, and interpretive frames.

The interaction between visual information and prior experience also reinforces the relevance of Peircean semiotics to the present study. The visual element encountered by the participant constitutes the observable sign, but the meaning constructed from that sign depends on how the participant relates it to what it represents and how the participant interprets it. The resulting meaning is therefore situated within the participant's experiential and cultural context.

Synthesis and Research Gap

The reviewed literature demonstrates that foreign-film viewing involves multiple and interconnected processes of meaning-making. Semiotic theory provides a framework for understanding how visual signs become meaningful; film studies emphasize the communicative functions of cinematic codes; audiovisual research demonstrates the multimodal nature of video and the importance of subtitles and captions; visual-literacy scholarship highlights the ability to interpret and critically engage with visual texts; intercultural communication research emphasizes the influence of cultural perspectives; and phenomenological research places viewers' lived experiences at the center of inquiry.

Despite these contributions, an important gap remains. Existing research has extensively examined audiovisual materials in relation to second-language learning, comprehension, vocabulary, grammar, listening, subtitles, and captions (Montero Perez, 2022; Muñoz et al., 2023). Other scholarship has examined visual literacy and the interpretation of visual texts (Farrar et al., 2024), while semiotic and intercultural perspectives provide theoretical explanations of how visual signs acquire meaning. However, these bodies of literature do not fully explain how non-native viewers personally experience and interpret visual codes when watching foreign films without subtitles, particularly when the spoken dialogue is not fully understood.

More specifically, limited empirical attention has been given to the lived experiences through which viewers notice colors, imagery, lighting, camera angles, gestures, facial expressions, settings, and symbolic objects; connect these visual cues to characters, emotions, relationships, and narrative situations; and negotiate their meanings using personal experience and cultural knowledge. The gap is therefore not simply a lack of research on visual signs or audiovisual materials, but a lack of phenomenological understanding of how viewers experience visual meaning-making under subtitle-free foreign-film viewing conditions.

The present study addresses this gap by exploring the lived experiences of Filipino English major students while viewing selected foreign film excerpts without subtitles. It examines the visual codes participants notice, how they experience and interpret these codes, how visual cues contribute to comprehension and meaning construction when spoken dialogue is not fully accessible, and how cultural backgrounds and personal experiences shape or vary their interpretations. By bringing together visual semiotics, audiovisual communication, visual literacy, intercultural meaning-making, and phenomenological inquiry, the study seeks to provide a more participant-centered account of how visual meaning is constructed across linguistic and cultural boundaries.

Theoretical Framework

This research is anchored in Charles Sanders Peirce's theory of semiotics, particularly the triadic relationship among the representamen, object, and interpretant. In Peirce's semiotic framework, the representamen refers to the sign or observable form through which something is represented; the object refers to that which the sign represents or to which it refers; and the interpretant refers to the meaning, understanding, or effect produced by the sign in the mind of the interpreter. The three elements are understood relationally, such that meaning emerges through the relationship between the observable sign, what it represents, and the interpretation constructed by the viewer.



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In the present study, the representamen refers to the observable visual elements encountered by participants while viewing the selected foreign film excerpts without subtitles. These may include colors, images, lighting, camera angles, facial expressions, gestures, settings, objects, and other visual features. The object refers to the person, situation, emotion, action, concept, or narrative condition to which the observed visual element is understood to refer.

The interpretant refers to the meaning or understanding that participants constructed from these visual elements based on their viewing experience.

It is important to distinguish Peirce's triadic relation of representamen–object–interpretant from his classification of signs as icons, indexes, and symbols. The latter constitutes a separate classification based on the relationship of a sign to its object. An icon signifies through a perceived resemblance or similarity to its object; an index signifies through a relationship of connection or indication with its object; and a symbol signifies through a socially established, conventional, or learned association. Thus, icon, index, and symbol should not be treated as equivalent to representamen, object, and interpretant. Rather, they describe different dimensions of how signs may function within Peirce's broader semiotic theory.

Table 1

Peirce's Triadic Model of Semiotic Meaning

Element	Description in the Present Study
Representamen	The observable sign or visual form encountered by the participant, such as a color, image, lighting condition, camera angle, gesture, facial expression, setting, or symbolic object.
Object	The person, situation, emotion, action, concept, or narrative condition that the participant understands the visual sign to represent or refer to.
Interpretant	The meaning, understanding, inference, or interpretation constructed by the participant from the relationship between the visual sign and what it represents.

Note. The representamen, object, and interpretant constitute the triadic relation through which semiotic meaning is constructed. Icon, index, and symbol are separate classifications of signs according to their relationship to their objects and are not equivalent to the three elements of the triad.

In this study, the Peircean framework serves primarily as a theoretical lens for understanding how participants moved from observing visual forms to identifying what those forms appeared to represent and constructing meanings from them. For example, a participant may notice a particular visual element in a film scene, relate that element to an emotion, character condition, setting, or narrative situation, and then construct an interpretation based on personal experience, prior knowledge, and cultural understanding. The framework therefore provides a way of explaining the semiotic process underlying participants' accounts without assuming that a particular visual sign has one universally fixed meaning.

The framework is used in conjunction with the phenomenological orientation of the study. The researchers did not impose predetermined meanings on the visual codes before analyzing the participants' experiences. Instead, participants' descriptions of what they noticed, experienced, and interpreted constituted the primary basis of the analysis. Peirce's semiotic concepts were subsequently used to help explain the relationship between the observed visual elements, their perceived referents, and the meanings constructed by the participants.

Accordingly, the theoretical framework supports the study's central premise that foreign-film comprehension without subtitles involves an active process of visual meaning-making. Participants encounter observable visual signs, relate these signs to people, situations, emotions, actions, or narrative conditions, and construct interpretations within the context of their cultural backgrounds, personal experiences, and prior knowledge. The framework therefore complements the phenomenological design by providing a theoretical account of how visual signs become meaningful in the experience of the viewer.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of the study is grounded in the assumption that viewing foreign films without subtitles requires participants to construct meaning from visual information in relation to their lived experiences, cultural backgrounds, and prior knowledge. The viewing encounter begins with selected foreign film excerpts presented without subtitles. Participants attend to visual codes such as colors, imagery, lighting, camera angles, facial expressions, gestures, settings, and symbolic objects. These visual elements serve as sources of information that participants notice and interpret while attempting to understand the film.



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The interpretation of visual codes is influenced by the participants' cultural backgrounds, personal experiences, prior knowledge, and visual semiotic awareness. Participants do not necessarily assign fixed or universal meanings to visual signs. Rather, they draw upon their own experiences and cultural understanding to interpret what they observe and to negotiate possible meanings within the context of each scene.

The framework therefore emphasizes a process of visual encounter, lived experience, interpretation, meaning negotiation, and narrative comprehension. The visual codes encountered during subtitle-free viewing provide the immediate experiential context, while participants' cultural and personal backgrounds shape how these codes are perceived and interpreted. Through this process, participants construct meanings about characters, emotions, settings, relationships, and narrative developments.

The framework is consistent with the phenomenological design because the central focus is not on determining the universal or predetermined meaning of a visual sign. Instead, it emphasizes how participants themselves experienced, perceived, interpreted, and constructed meaning from visual codes while watching foreign films without subtitles. Peirce's semiotic framework serves as a theoretical lens for understanding the relationship among the observable visual sign, what the sign refers to, and the meaning constructed by the participant; however, the participants' lived experiences remain the primary basis of interpretation.

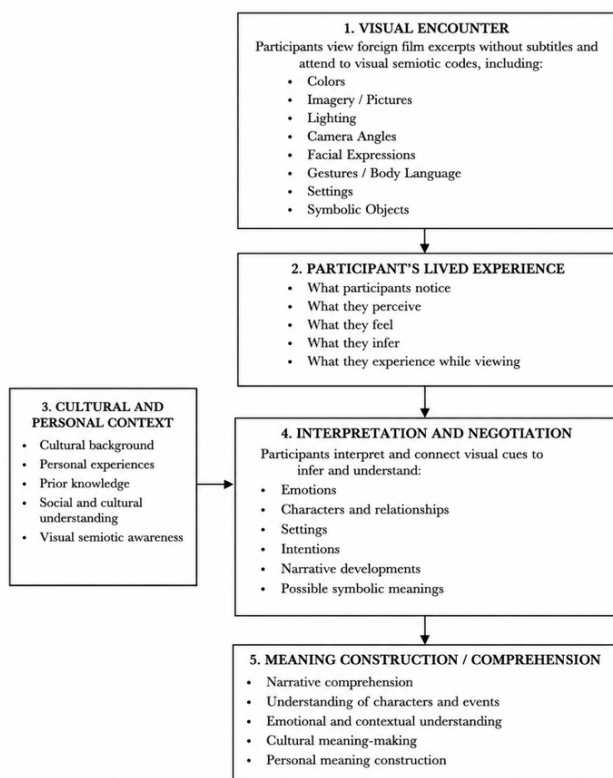


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of Meaning-Making in Subtitle-Free Foreign-Film Viewing

Statement of the Problem

Foreign films communicate meaning not only through spoken language but also through visual signs, symbols, imagery, camera techniques, lighting, and other visual semiotic elements that enable audiences to interpret narratives across linguistic and cultural boundaries. As international films become increasingly accessible through digital media, understanding how viewers construct meaning from visual codes has become an important focus of communication research, visual literacy, and intercultural communication. Despite the growing body of literature on semiotics and audiovisual communication, few studies have specifically examined how viewers comprehend foreign films without subtitles and how cultural background influences their interpretation of visual codes.



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This study sought to explore the lived experiences of viewers in interpreting visual signs, symbols, and narrative cues embedded in foreign films viewed without subtitles. Specifically, it examined how visual codes facilitate meaning-making, how audiences interpret these semiotic resources within their cultural contexts, and how visual communication contributes to the comprehension of foreign films. The findings are expected to contribute to communication research, visual literacy, intercultural communication, and language education by providing a deeper understanding of the role of visual semiotics in cross-cultural meaning construction.

Specific Objectives

This study aimed to:

1. describe the visual codes that participants noticed while viewing selected foreign film excerpts without subtitles;
2. explore how participants experienced and interpreted visual codes in making sense of characters, emotions, settings, and narrative situations;
3. examine how participants described the contribution of visual codes to film comprehension and meaning construction when spoken dialogue was not fully understood; and
4. explore how participants' cultural backgrounds and personal experiences shaped or varied their interpretations of visual codes.

Research Questions

This study sought to explore the lived experiences of Filipino English major students. Specifically, it sought to answer the following questions:

1. What visual codes did participants notice while viewing selected foreign film excerpts without subtitles?
2. How did participants experience and interpret the visual codes in making sense of characters, emotions, settings, and narrative situations?
3. How did participants describe the contribution of visual codes to their comprehension of the film and construction of meaning when spoken dialogue was not fully understood?
4. How did participants' cultural backgrounds and personal experiences shape or vary their interpretations of visual codes?

METHODS

Research Design

A qualitative phenomenological approach was used to explore participants' lived experiences of viewing and interpreting foreign films without subtitles. The phenomenon of interest was the experience of constructing meaning from visual codes when spoken language was not fully accessible. Data were collected through individual, in-depth, semi-structured interviews with purposively selected participants (Nyimbili & Nyimbili, 2024). The researcher's initial review of the film excerpts was used only to identify potential visual cues and guide the viewing/interview process; the central analytic evidence came from participants' descriptions of their lived experiences. Peer debriefing and panel review were used to strengthen the credibility of the analysis.

Population and Sampling

This qualitative study involved individual interviews with key informants selected for their firsthand experience of watching foreign films without subtitles. Six English major students from UM Tagum College participated. The sample was selected for experiential relevance rather than statistical representation, consistent with the phenomenological purpose of obtaining rich descriptions of the phenomenon.

Sampling Technique. Purposive sampling was employed to select participants who could provide detailed accounts of the phenomenon under study. Participants were required to have firsthand experience watching foreign films without subtitles and to be able to reflect on how they used visual cues to understand what they were viewing. Recruitment continued until the researchers judged that the interviews provided sufficient depth and recurring experiential patterns for thematic analysis.

Participants. Six participants took part in the study. All were English major students at UM Tagum College, were 18 years old or above, and had experience regularly watching foreign films without subtitles. Participants who did not meet these criteria were excluded. The sample size was determined by the depth and relevance of participants' experiences and the researchers' assessment of the adequacy and recurrence of experiential patterns in the interview data rather than by statistical generalization.



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Instruments. A researcher-developed semi-structured interview guide was used to elicit detailed descriptions of participants' lived experiences. Questions focused on what participants noticed in the film excerpts, how they interpreted visual codes, how visual cues helped them understand characters and narrative situations, and how their cultural background and prior experiences shaped their interpretations. The guide was reviewed and validated by experts before data collection.

Data Collection

After securing permission from the appropriate officials and obtaining informed consent, the researchers explained the study and established rapport with each participant. Participants viewed selected foreign film excerpts without subtitles and were then interviewed individually using the semi-structured interview guide. The interviews were conducted face-to-face on the school campus after the interview guide had been reviewed and approved. Each interview lasted approximately one hour.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis. The analysis was conducted systematically to ensure that the identified themes remained grounded in participants' accounts and descriptions of their lived experiences.

1. **Familiarization** – The researchers read the interview transcripts several times to become immersed in participants' accounts. Significant statements describing what participants noticed, felt, inferred, and understood while viewing the excerpts were noted.
2. **Initial Coding** – Meaningful segments of the transcripts were coded according to the experience or meaning expressed by participants. Examples included references to emotional meanings of colors, contextual use of pictures, mood conveyed by lighting, perceived power or vulnerability from camera angles, and meanings associated with symbolic objects.
3. **Generating Initial Themes** – Related codes were grouped into broader experiential patterns. The initial thematic structure was developed from recurring participant accounts rather than imposed solely from Peirce's categories. This process resulted in candidate themes concerning colors, imagery/pictures, lighting, camera angles, and symbolism.
4. **Reviewing Themes** – The candidate themes were reviewed against the complete set of participant accounts to determine whether each theme coherently represented a recurring aspect of the lived viewing experience and whether it addressed the research questions.
5. **Defining and Naming Themes** – Five final experiential themes were retained: Colors; Imagery/Pictures; Lighting; Camera Angles; and Symbolism. The themes were defined in terms of how participants experienced and used each visual code in constructing meaning while viewing foreign films without subtitles.
6. **Writing Up** – The findings were organized according to the research questions and supported with participants' verbatim excerpts. The discussion linked each theme to the participants' descriptions of lived experience and, where appropriate, related these meanings to the study's semiotic framework without replacing participants' accounts with researcher-imposed interpretations.

Throughout the analysis, an audit record was maintained to document the movement from transcript excerpts to codes, themes, and interpretive claims. The researchers repeatedly checked whether each conclusion was supported by participants' accounts and whether the final themes remained consistent with the phenomenological focus of the study.

Ethical Considerations

All key informants were informed about the purpose of the study, including its voluntary nature, and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty before the interview began. Written permission was obtained from all informants prior to data collection.

Anonymity and confidentiality were strictly maintained throughout the study. All transcripts and reports had their personal identification removed, and the researchers were the only ones with secure access to the material. Documents and interview recordings were removed after processing and used only for research purposes.

These procedures ensured the full protection of the informants' rights, welfare, and privacy while maintaining ethical research standards. The study obtained ethical approval from the university ethics review committee of the University of Mindanao-Main Campus.



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RESULTS and DISCUSSION

The findings are presented as five emergent themes derived from the participants' lived experiences of viewing selected foreign films without subtitles: Colors, Pictures/Imagery, Lighting, Camera Angles, and Symbolism. These themes represent the final thematic categories generated through the analysis of the interview accounts. Facial expressions, gestures, body language, settings, clothing, objects, and other visual features are treated as specific visual cues discussed within these broader thematic categories rather than as separate themes. This organization reflects the participants' descriptions of how multiple visual elements worked together during the viewing experience.

The selected film excerpts served as common viewing stimuli during the data-gathering process. The researchers initially noted prominent visual features in the excerpts to guide the interview prompts; however, the final themes were derived from the participants' descriptions rather than imposed solely from the researchers' preliminary classification. The findings therefore focus on how participants experienced and interpreted the visual elements while attempting to comprehend the films without subtitles. This approach is consistent with the phenomenological orientation of the study, in which the participants' lived experiences constitute the primary basis for understanding the phenomenon.

The multimodal nature of audiovisual materials provides viewers with several sources of information that may contribute to comprehension. Montero Perez (2022) explains that audiovisual input combines multiple modes of information and that learners may draw upon visual, auditory, and textual resources during viewing. More recent evidence likewise demonstrates that audiovisual viewing can contribute to second-language learning, although its effects vary according to the type of audiovisual material and learning context (Sutton & Webb, 2026). The present findings extend this body of work by focusing not primarily on measurable language-learning outcomes but on the lived experience of constructing meaning from visual information when subtitles are unavailable.

Visual Codes Identified by the Participants

Figure 2

The Visual Codes Presented in the Selected Foreign Film

VISUAL CODES	SAMPLE CLIPS FROM FOREIGN FILMS
Camera Angle ● High-Angle (vulnerability)	 No Country for Old Men (2007)
● Low-Angle (power/dominance)	 Parasite 2019  Pan's Labyrinth 2006
	 No Country for Old Men (2007)
	 Parasite 2019
	 Pan's Labyrinth 2006



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Lighting



House of Screams (1969)



Pride and Prejudice (1813)



Blade Runner (2017)

Cultural Symbol



Seven Samurai (1954)



Hunger Games (2012)



Raise the Red Lantern (1991)

Symbolic Setting and Object



The Valley of Ashes
The Great Gatsby (2013)



The Shutter Island (2010)



The House in Mother! (2017)

Costume and Performance



Romeo and Juliet (1996)



Star Wars (1977)

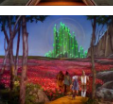


Happy the Clown (2025)

Color as Code



The Funeral (2006)



The Wizard of Oz (1939)



Spider Man (2002)



Perfect Days (2023)

Facial Expression



The Hidden Face (2011)



Open Your Eyes (1997)



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Note. The selected film excerpts were used as common viewing stimuli during the interviews. The five themes shown in the figure represent the final thematic categories generated from participants' descriptions.

The participants frequently described visual codes as interconnected rather than isolated technical features. Camera perspectives influenced their perceptions of characters, lighting contributed to their interpretation of atmosphere and emotion, colors helped them infer mood and thematic conditions, while objects, settings, gestures, and other symbolic elements provided contextual information. These findings suggest that participants did not simply identify visual features; they actively related those features to characters, situations, emotions, and possible narrative developments.

This pattern is consistent with the multimodal character of audiovisual communication described by Montero Perez (2022), in which viewers encounter multiple sources of information simultaneously. It also corresponds with the phenomenological perspective of the study because the participants' accounts show that visual meaning was experienced as part of an unfolding viewing situation rather than as a fixed property of individual signs. Recent empirical phenomenological work in film studies likewise emphasizes the value of examining spectators' lived, embodied, affective, and attentional experiences rather than treating film viewing solely as an objective analysis of cinematic form (Boer, 2025).

The findings further support the study's Peircean theoretical framework. The visual elements encountered by participants may function as signs or representamens, while the people, emotions, situations, or narrative conditions to which participants related those elements constitute their perceived objects. The meanings or understandings that participants constructed from these relationships represent the interpretive dimension of the sign process. Importantly, the participants' accounts demonstrate that such interpretations were not necessarily universal; they were influenced by prior knowledge, cultural background, and personal experience.

1. Colors

Participants described colors as important visual cues for emotions, themes, character identity, and anticipated narrative conditions. They associated red with passion or danger, blue with calmness or sadness, and green with growth. Brighter visual tones were sometimes connected with hope, while dimmer or darker tones were associated with fear or uncertainty. The participants' descriptions therefore indicate that color served as an accessible visual resource for interpreting scenes when spoken dialogue was not fully understood.

One participant stated:

Sean: "Red for passion, blue for calmness, and green for growth and for the lighting: bright for hope and dim for fear or uncertainty..."

This account demonstrates that participants did not merely notice colors as aesthetic features. They connected colors with abstract emotional and thematic concepts and used these associations as interpretive resources. From a phenomenological perspective, the significance of color therefore lies in how it was experienced by the participant within the particular scene. The participant did not describe red, blue, or green as possessing an objectively fixed meaning; instead, the colors became meaningful through their relationship with perceived emotions and situations.

This finding is consistent with research emphasizing that visual literacy involves more than recognizing visual elements; it involves interpreting and constructing meaning from images and visual compositions (Farrar et al., 2024). The participants' accounts demonstrate this interpretive process because they moved from seeing a color to associating it with an emotion, condition, or narrative possibility. In this sense, color functioned as a visual resource through which participants negotiated meaning.

The finding also supports the Peircean perspective adopted in this study. The observed color constitutes part of the representamen, while the emotional or narrative condition associated with the color may function as the perceived object. The participant's understanding—such as interpreting red as passion or danger—constitutes the interpretive meaning constructed from the sign relationship. The meaning was therefore not simply contained in the color itself but emerged through the participant's interpretation.

The cultural dimension of the finding is particularly important. Participants recognized that visual meanings could differ because viewers possess different backgrounds and experiences. This supports the study's broader argument that visual interpretation is situated rather than universally fixed. Consequently, the findings should not be



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interpreted as establishing that red always means passion or that blue always means calmness. Rather, they show that participants experienced these associations as useful interpretive cues during subtitle-free viewing.

2. Pictures/Imagery

Participants described pictures, scenes, objects, and settings as contextual anchors that helped them understand unfamiliar situations. When spoken dialogue was difficult to understand, they attended to what was visible on the screen to infer where the scene was taking place, what was happening, who was involved, and what might occur next.

As one participant explained:

Ash: "For me, the visual codes are important in order for us viewers to understand the film and also to get the idea of what that film will show in the later minutes or hours."

This statement illustrates the role of imagery in narrative orientation. The participant did not describe visual information merely as supplementary decoration. Instead, visual information helped establish an understanding of the narrative and allowed the viewer to anticipate possible developments. The finding suggests that when linguistic information was incomplete, participants used observable elements in the scene as contextual evidence from which they constructed an interpretation.

This observation is consistent with Montero Perez (2022), who characterizes audiovisual input as multimodal and emphasizes that viewers process information from multiple channels during audiovisual comprehension. The present finding adds a phenomenological dimension to this literature by showing how participants themselves experienced visual information as a resource for understanding the developing narrative. Rather than measuring comprehension through a test score, the study captures how participants described the process by which visual information became meaningful during viewing.

The finding is also consistent with research on visual literacy. Farrar et al. (2024) emphasize that interpreting images involves active processes of thinking and meaning construction. The participants in the present study similarly moved beyond simply identifying what appeared on screen. They used images and scenes to infer context, relationships, and possible narrative developments.

From the perspective of Peircean semiotics, pictures and imagery may operate as observable signs that participants relate to particular objects or situations. The resulting interpretation depends on how the participant understands the relationship between what is seen and what it appears to represent. This helps explain why the same visual material may not necessarily produce identical interpretations among viewers.

Thus, imagery functioned as a contextual bridge between incomplete linguistic understanding and narrative comprehension. The participants' accounts suggest that visual information allowed them to remain engaged with the narrative even when they could not fully access the spoken language.

3. Lighting

Lighting emerged as an important visual cue for interpreting atmosphere, emotion, genre-related expectations, and possible narrative developments. Participants described darker lighting as associated with fear, horror, or uncertainty, whereas brighter visual conditions were sometimes associated with hope, happiness, fantasy, romance, or other positive emotional situations.

One participant stated:

Clei: "By observing what they see on screen such as facial expression, movements, lighting sa movie, para ma help ang viewers to understand kung unsa na emotion ani na movie. Example the lighting is quite dark, we can perceive that it is horror."

English translation: "By observing what they see on screen such as facial expressions, movements, and lighting of the movie, viewers can understand the emotion of the characters in the movie. For example, when the lighting is quite dark, we can perceive that it is horror."

The participant's account demonstrates that lighting was interpreted together with other visual cues rather than in isolation. Facial expressions, movements, and lighting were collectively used to infer emotional conditions. This is important because it indicates that participants experienced cinematic meaning as multimodal and relational. They did not necessarily isolate one technical element from the rest of the scene when constructing meaning.

The finding also demonstrates the distinction between observing a visual feature and interpreting it. Participants could identify that a scene was dark, but their interpretation went further: darkness was associated with



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fear, horror, or uncertainty. In phenomenological terms, the meaning of the lighting was therefore found in the participant's experience of what the visual condition suggested within the scene.

This finding complements research on audiovisual input, which emphasizes that viewers process multiple modes of information during audiovisual encounters (Montero Perez, 2022). It also aligns with the broader visual-literacy perspective that visual elements become meaningful through interpretation rather than simple perception (Farrar et al., 2024).

The finding has a further implication for the study's Peircean framework. Dark lighting can be understood as the observable representamen, while the emotional or narrative condition inferred from it constitutes the perceived object. The participant's interpretation—such as understanding the scene as frightening or belonging to the horror genre—represents the interpretant. The same visual condition may therefore produce different interpretations depending on context and viewer experience.

Importantly, the findings should not be interpreted as establishing that dark lighting universally means horror. Rather, participants experienced darkness as a cue that supported this interpretation. This distinction is essential because the study examines lived experience rather than predetermined cinematic meanings.

4. Camera Angles

Camera angles were described as visual elements that influenced how participants perceived characters and understood their roles within particular scenes. Participants associated low-angle shots with power, dominance, strength, authority, or intimidation, whereas high-angle shots were associated with vulnerability, helplessness, weakness, or emotional isolation.

One participant stated:

Sean: "For the angles: low-angled shot for power and high-angled shot for vulnerability."

The finding suggests that camera perspective affected participants' perception of character positioning and emotional condition. The camera angle was not experienced merely as a technical feature of cinematography. Instead, participants connected the perspective from which a character was presented with judgments about the character's status, strength, or vulnerability.

This finding is particularly relevant to the study because it demonstrates how viewers can construct character-related meanings from visual information even when spoken dialogue is not fully understood. Participants used the spatial relationship created by the camera to develop an interpretation of the character. Thus, camera perspective became part of the evidence through which participants negotiated narrative meaning.

The finding can also be understood through the study's visual-literacy perspective. Visual literacy requires viewers to attend to how visual choices organize perception and communicate possible meanings (Farrar et al., 2024). The participants demonstrated this process by recognizing that the position of the camera affected how they perceived the character.

At the same time, the phenomenological orientation requires caution in interpreting this finding. The study does not establish that a low-angle shot objectively means power or that a high-angle shot objectively means vulnerability. Rather, these were experienced meanings reported by the participants. Their interpretations may reflect familiarity with cinematic conventions, prior viewing experiences, and cultural knowledge.

From a Peircean perspective, the camera angle constitutes an observable sign through which participants inferred something about the character or situation. The resulting interpretation emerged through the relationship between what they saw and what they believed that visual perspective indicated. This supports the study's central proposition that meaning is constructed through an interaction between visual signs and the viewer's interpretive resources.

5. Symbolism

Symbolism emerged as a theme through participants' descriptions of objects, colors, settings, gestures, decorations, visual motifs, and other elements that they believed conveyed meanings beyond their literal appearance. Participants reported that such elements sometimes encouraged them to infer cultural, emotional, thematic, or narrative meanings even when those meanings were not explicitly explained through dialogue.

One participant stated:

Ash: "For me, the common visual codes that I consider making sure that I get the message of the film without subtitles are the decorations and the filters that they use while shooting the film."



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Another participant associated particular symbolic elements with meanings such as love, deceit, and time:

Sean: "Symbols: rose for love, snake for deceit, and clock for time."

These accounts demonstrate that participants actively interpreted visual elements beyond their immediate physical appearance. A rose, snake, clock, decoration, or visual filter became meaningful when participants connected the element with a concept, emotion, or narrative idea. The process therefore involved interpretation rather than simple recognition.

This finding is particularly relevant to the study's semiotic foundation. Peircean semiotics emphasizes that the meaning of a sign is constructed through a relationship involving the sign, its object, and the interpretant. The participants' accounts illustrate this process because they observed particular visual elements, associated them with something beyond their literal appearance, and constructed an interpretation based on their knowledge and experience.

The findings also reinforce the importance of cultural and experiential context. Participants did not necessarily interpret symbols from a culturally neutral position. Their understandings were shaped by previous exposure, cultural knowledge, and personal experience. Consequently, a symbol that seemed immediately meaningful to one participant might not necessarily carry the same significance for another viewer.

This observation is consistent with the broader visual-literacy perspective that visual interpretation involves active meaning construction rather than passive reception (Farrar et al., 2024). It also supports the study's intercultural dimension because foreign films may contain symbolic elements whose meanings are influenced by cultural conventions unfamiliar to viewers.

The finding should therefore not be interpreted as demonstrating universal symbolic meanings. Instead, it demonstrates that participants used symbolic associations as interpretive resources when attempting to understand foreign films without subtitles.

Integration of the Five Themes

Although the five themes are presented separately for analytical clarity, participants experienced them as interconnected elements of the same viewing process. Colors could reinforce lighting; lighting could influence perceptions of atmosphere; camera angles could shape perceptions of characters; pictures and settings could establish narrative context; and symbolic objects could provide additional cultural or thematic information. Facial expressions, gestures, and body language likewise operated alongside these elements to help participants infer emotions, intentions, and relationships.

This interconnectedness is consistent with the multimodal nature of audiovisual communication. Audiovisual texts do not normally present visual elements as isolated units; rather, viewers encounter combinations of image, movement, sound, spatial organization, and language simultaneously (Montero Perez, 2022). The present findings show how participants experienced this multimodality when subtitles were unavailable.

The participants' accounts further suggest that visual codes served at least three related functions during subtitle-free viewing. First, they provided contextual information, helping participants identify settings, characters, actions, and situations. Second, they provided emotional and thematic information, allowing participants to infer moods, relationships, and possible meanings. Third, they provided narrative information, helping participants anticipate developments and maintain an understanding of the unfolding story.

The findings therefore extend the existing literature on audiovisual input by shifting attention from the general effectiveness of audiovisual materials toward the subjective process through which viewers experience and interpret visual information. Existing research has demonstrated the value of audiovisual input for language learning and comprehension (Montero Perez, 2022; Sutton & Webb, 2026), but the present study shows how learners themselves describe the visual resources they rely on when subtitles are unavailable.

The phenomenological character of the findings is particularly evident in the participants' recognition that meanings were not always fixed. A visual cue became meaningful in relation to the scene, the participant's prior knowledge, and the participant's cultural and personal experiences. Recent empirical phenomenological work in film studies similarly demonstrates the value of examining spectators' detailed lived experiences rather than reducing viewing to purely cognitive or formal processes (Boer, 2025).

The findings therefore support a view of foreign-film comprehension as an active, situated, and multimodal meaning-making process. Participants did not simply decode visual signs according to predetermined rules. Instead, they noticed visual elements, connected them with perceived situations or meanings, drew upon prior experience and



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cultural knowledge, and constructed interpretations that helped them engage with the narrative despite incomplete linguistic access.

Cultural and Personal Experience in Visual Meaning-Making

A particularly important finding across the five themes was the role of participants' cultural backgrounds, personal experiences, and prior knowledge. Participants recognized that similar visual cues could lead to different interpretations depending on the viewer. This finding indicates that visual meaning was not experienced as something entirely contained within the film; rather, it emerged through an interaction between the visual stimulus and the viewer's interpretive resources.

This observation is significant for foreign-film viewing because participants encountered audiovisual material produced within cultural contexts that may differ from their own. The absence of subtitles further increased the importance of contextual interpretation because participants could not rely on translated text to directly clarify unfamiliar dialogue. They therefore used visible information to form possible interpretations and adjusted those interpretations according to what they already knew.

The finding reinforces the importance of visual literacy as an interpretive practice. Farrar et al. (2024) emphasize that engagement with images can involve aesthetic, intercultural, empathic, and ethical dimensions. In the present study, participants' interpretations similarly extended beyond simple visual recognition. They connected visual information with emotional, cultural, and narrative meanings.

The finding also strengthens the phenomenological interpretation of the study. Boer (2025) demonstrates the value of attending to spectators' lived experiences when studying film reception. Consistent with this approach, the present findings show that participants' interpretations were situated within their individual lifeworlds. Their experiences, prior knowledge, and cultural backgrounds influenced what they noticed and how they interpreted it.

Accordingly, the findings suggest that visual comprehension should not be understood as a universal decoding process in which every viewer arrives at one predetermined meaning. Instead, subtitle-free foreign-film viewing involved negotiation among visual information, narrative context, prior knowledge, cultural experience, and personal interpretation.

Overall Discussion

Taken together, the five themes demonstrate that visual codes served as important resources for participants attempting to comprehend foreign films without subtitles. Colors helped participants infer emotional and thematic conditions; pictures and imagery provided contextual and narrative information; lighting contributed to perceptions of atmosphere and emotion; camera angles influenced perceptions of character roles and conditions; and symbolism enabled participants to connect visual elements with broader concepts and meanings.

The findings are consistent with the broader literature on audiovisual communication, which recognizes that viewers process multiple modes of information during audiovisual encounters (Montero Perez, 2022). They also complement research showing that audiovisual input can contribute to language learning (Sutton & Webb, 2026), while extending that literature by examining participants' subjective experiences of visual meaning-making rather than focusing exclusively on language-learning outcomes.

The findings further support visual-literacy scholarship by demonstrating that participants did not simply perceive visual elements; they interpreted them and connected them with broader meanings. Their accounts show a movement from observation to interpretation, particularly when linguistic information was incomplete. This process is compatible with the semiotic framework of the study, in which an observable sign becomes meaningful through its relationship with what it represents and through the interpretation constructed by the viewer.

Most importantly, the findings indicate that visual meanings were situated and experiential. Participants did not consistently treat colors, lighting, camera angles, or symbols as possessing universal meanings. Instead, they interpreted visual cues according to the context of the scene and their own cultural backgrounds, experiences, and prior knowledge. This finding is central to the phenomenological character of the study and prevents the results from being reduced to a list of fixed cinematic meanings.

The study therefore contributes to the understanding of foreign-film comprehension by showing that subtitle-free viewing can involve an active process of visual noticing, contextual inference, emotional interpretation, narrative construction, and cultural meaning negotiation. Visual codes functioned not as substitutes that completely replaced



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spoken language but as complementary resources that helped participants remain oriented toward the narrative when linguistic information was not fully accessible.

In this sense, the participants' experiences demonstrate that comprehending foreign films without subtitles is not simply a matter of decoding isolated visual signs. It is a situated process in which viewers bring together multiple visual cues, narrative context, cultural knowledge, personal experience, and prior understanding to construct meanings that allow them to engage with the film.

The findings consequently support the study's central proposition that visual meaning-making is both semiotic and phenomenological: semiotic because participants related observable visual signs to objects and constructed meanings from those relationships, and phenomenological because those meanings were experienced and interpreted within the participants' individual lifeworlds.

Conclusions

The findings indicate that Filipino English major students experienced visual codes as important resources for making sense of selected foreign films when subtitles were unavailable. Five recurring experiential themes—colors, pictures/imagery, lighting, camera angles, and symbolism—emerged from the participants' accounts. These visual codes helped participants infer emotions, characterize people and situations, identify settings, recognize thematic conditions, and anticipate possible narrative developments when spoken dialogue was not fully understood.

The study further concludes that visual meaning was constructed through an interaction between the visual elements encountered in the films and the participants' prior knowledge, personal experiences, and cultural backgrounds. Participants did not consistently treat colors, lighting, camera perspectives, images, or symbols as possessing fixed and universally applicable meanings. Instead, they interpreted these cues within the context of particular scenes and in relation to their own experiential and cultural frames of reference. Visual meaning was therefore experienced as situated, contextual, and interpretive.

The findings also indicate that participants relied on multiple visual and nonverbal cues simultaneously. Facial expressions, gestures, body language, settings, clothing, objects, color, lighting, and camera perspectives worked together to provide contextual, emotional, and narrative information. These cues did not replace spoken language or guarantee complete comprehension; rather, they provided additional information that helped participants construct plausible interpretations and remain oriented to the developing narrative when linguistic information was limited.

The study therefore concludes that subtitle-free foreign-film viewing can be understood as an active and multimodal meaning-making experience. Participants moved from noticing observable visual elements to relating those elements to characters, emotions, situations, and narrative possibilities. Their accounts demonstrate that comprehension involved not only what was presented on screen but also how viewers interpreted what they saw through their existing knowledge and experiences. This finding supports the study's phenomenological orientation and complements its Peircean framework by demonstrating that visual signs become meaningful through the viewer's interpretive engagement with them.

In relation to the study objectives, the findings establish that participants identified recurring visual codes; described how these codes helped them interpret characters, emotions, settings, and narrative situations; experienced visual cues as resources for constructing meaning when spoken dialogue was not fully understood; and recognized that cultural background and personal experience influenced their interpretations. The study consequently contributes to understanding visual meaning-making, visual literacy, and intercultural communication in foreign-film viewing, while recognizing that its findings represent the lived experiences of only six participants and should not be generalized as universal meanings of particular cinematic codes or as representative of all Filipino English major students.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, English language and communication educators may incorporate carefully selected foreign-film excerpts into classroom activities to develop students' visual literacy, critical viewing, intercultural awareness, and meaning-making skills. Film excerpts may be selected according to clear instructional objectives and may include visual elements that allow learners to examine how colors, lighting, camera angles, facial expressions, gestures, settings, objects, and other visual features contribute to meaning.

Teachers may develop guided viewing activities in which students first identify observable visual codes and then explain what those elements suggest about characters, emotions, relationships, settings, themes, or possible narrative developments. Students may also be encouraged to distinguish between what they directly observe and what they infer from those observations. Such activities may help learners become more conscious of the process through which visual information contributes to comprehension.



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Teachers may also encourage students to compare different interpretations of the same visual cue. Because the present findings indicate that participants' interpretations were influenced by cultural background, prior knowledge, and personal experience, classroom discussions may allow students to explain why a particular color, symbol, gesture, setting, or cinematic technique may carry different meanings for different viewers. Such activities may strengthen both visual literacy and intercultural awareness while discouraging the assumption that visual meanings are always universal.

For curriculum developers and program coordinators, the findings may inform the development of learning activities that integrate foreign audiovisual materials with language, communication, media, and intercultural education. Where appropriate, learning tasks may move from subtitle-supported viewing to selected subtitle-free activities, allowing students to examine how they use visual and contextual information when linguistic support is reduced. Such activities should be appropriately scaffolded and should not be treated as substitutes for explicit language instruction.

For audiovisual translators and media practitioners, the findings may provide a useful reminder that viewers may attend to visual context when linguistic information is limited. Translation and localization practices may therefore consider the interaction between dialogue and visual information, particularly when visual elements carry culturally specific or context-dependent meanings. The findings do not establish specific translation rules, but they suggest the value of considering how audiences may construct meaning from visual and linguistic resources together.

Finally, future researchers may further investigate subtitle-free foreign-film viewing using larger and more diverse participant groups, different language combinations, and a wider range of film genres and cultural contexts. Future studies may also compare subtitle-supported and subtitle-free viewing, examine differences in interpretation across cultural or proficiency groups, or use longitudinal and mixed-method approaches to investigate how visual meaning-making develops over time. Such research may extend the present phenomenological findings and provide additional evidence concerning the relationship among visual codes, language comprehension, cultural experience, and audiovisual meaning-making.

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