

Research Article

Communicating Beyond Barriers: Indonesian Cultural Perspectives on Deafness in The Silent Child (2017) Short Film

Cysakaren Diva Pratiwi¹, Dewi Meyrasyawati²

¹Master Student of Literary and Cultural Studies Program, Faculty of Humanities, Universitas Airlangga, Surabaya, Indonesia

²Senior lecturer of Literary and Cultural Studies Master Program, Faculty of Humanities, Universitas Airlangga, Surabaya, Indonesia

I N F O

Corresponding Author:

Cysakaren Diva Pratiwi, Cultural Studies Program,
Faculty of Humanities, Universitas Airlangga,
Surabaya, Indonesia

Email Id:

cysakaren.divapратиwi-2021@fib.unair.ac.id

Orcid Id:

<https://orcid.org/0009-0004-6605-8536>

How to cite this article:

Pratiwi C D, Meyrasyawati D. Communicating
Beyond Barriers: Indonesian Cultural Perspectives
on Deafness in The Silent Child (2017) Short Film.
J Adv Res Humani Social Sci 2025; 12(1): 26-33

Date of Submission: 2025-05-12

Date of Acceptance: 2025-06-20

A B S T R A C T

This study explores how Indonesian students interpret the portrayal of deafness and communication in *The Silent Child* (2017) using Stuart Hall's Encoding/Decoding Theory. Hall's model emphasizes that media messages are encoded with a preferred meaning but are actively interpreted by audiences based on their cultural background and experiences. Through a qualitative approach, this research analyzes audience responses from eight students at Rumah Bahasa Surabaya to examine their reception of the film's themes on inclusive education and sign language. Findings suggest that while most students aligned with the film's dominant-hegemonic position, recognizing sign language as essential for deaf individuals, some engaged in negotiated readings, questioning its applicability to Indonesia's oralism-dominated education system. A minority exhibited oppositional readings, resisting the film's perspective based on personal beliefs about communication and disability. The study also examines cultural transfer, illustrating how local norms influence the interpretation of global narratives. Additionally, the role of non-verbal communication and emotional engagement in fostering empathy was examined, revealing that silence and visual storytelling deepened audience connections to the protagonist. While the film successfully raised awareness, motivation to take action, such as learning sign language, varied among participants. These findings highlight the complexity of cross-cultural media reception and contribute to discussions on inclusive education, disability representation, and audience engagement. By applying Hall's framework, this study underscores how films serve as sites of cultural negotiation, influencing audience perceptions through both global and local ideological lenses.

Keywords: Audience Response, Cultural transfer, Encoding decoding theory, Inclusive education, The silent child, Short Film

Introduction

Humans perceive language and its meaning through the exchange of communication between two or more individuals. This is proven by how humans are divided

into communities and groups that communicate with their distinct language within the group. Lupyan et al. (2020)¹ stated that a language user is an expert who can familiarize themselves with thousands of visual perceptions that can

be categorized into named categories. This ability that humans have as users of language creates an experience that enables meaningful communication between other humans. According to Phillips (2012)², the main reason for conducting a response study is to explore the reception and response of the audiences toward a form of media, whether it involves emotional or intellectual response. Philips further explains that response studies in media, specifically in film, differentiate between audience and spectator. An audience is a group of people that has a collective response and reception, and a spectator is an individual response that is unaffected by the influence of a bigger group.

Conducting a response study is not always limited to films or movies, as it can be used in other forms of media such as literature, video games, or social media. However, films are unique as they are more accessible to a wide range of people because of their medium that utilizes both visual and audio aspects to deliver messages and narratives to the audiences. These properties helped in creating an immersion, which has become the distinct trait of experiencing movies and films for viewers and audiences, as they play a significant role in establishing viewing experience (D'Aloia, 2012).³ Film viewing experiences are more than an act of leisure, they can also be intended to be an act of educating oneself on a particular subject. During the early 20th century, historical films were widely used as a tool of education that had the potential to replace school instructors (Paxton and Marcus, 2018).⁴ However, later on, in the late 20th century, films were less encouraged to be used in class as many instructors preferred the use of academic literature to teach students instead of using documentary or historical films.

Andrienne Shaw in *Encoding and Decoding Affordances: Stuart Hall and Interactive Media Technologies* (2017) mentioned that Stuart Hall's Encoding/Decoding model (1973) offers a foundational approach to understanding how media messages are produced, distributed, and interpreted by audiences. According to Hall, media producers encode texts with specific meanings, but these meanings are not always received as intended. Instead, audiences decode them through the lens of their own cultural and ideological backgrounds, leading to three possible interpretations: dominant, negotiated, and oppositional readings. This model challenges the idea of passive media consumption, emphasizing that audiences are active participants in meaning-making. As Shaw (2017)⁷ expands upon Hall's model, audience responses are shaped not only by cultural context but also by the affordances of the media itself, from how it invites certain interactions while limiting others.

On the other side, Herman and Morgan (2011)⁸ explore how early communication development significantly impacts deaf individuals' ability to interact with the hearing world.

They highlight that deaf children from hearing families often face barriers in acquiring sign language due to limited exposure, whereas those born into Deaf families benefit from natural early language acquisition. This aligns with the struggles depicted in *The Silent Child* (2017), where the protagonist, Libby, is a deaf girl in a hearing family who experiences isolation due to a lack of accessible communication. The film resonates with broader global issues of deaf inclusion, particularly within societies where sign language education is not widely integrated.

From an Indonesian perspective, the limited recognition and accessibility of Indonesian Sign Language (BISINDO) further complicates communication barriers for deaf individuals. Herman and Morgan (2011)⁸ emphasize that effective language exposure and intervention at an early age can significantly improve social and cognitive outcomes. However, in Indonesia, many families and educators prioritize oralism over sign language, often leading to similar challenges as portrayed in *The Silent Child*. The reluctance to adopt sign language as a primary communication tool reinforces cultural stigmas surrounding deafness. The responses offer insight into whether students view Libby's struggle as a reflection of systemic issues in Indonesia or as an isolated, Western-centric narrative. This connects with Biltereyst and Meers' (2016)⁶ concept of cultural transfer, as the film's global reach allows for cross-national engagement with issues of disability representation.

Building upon these foundational ideas, this research focuses on a group of 8 students in the classroom setting of "Audience Response Analysis: The Silent Child Short Film at Rumah Bahasa Surabaya," where the author serves as the tutor. To analyze how Indonesian students interpret *The Silent Child*, this study applies Stuart Hall's Encoding/Decoding Theory (1970s) as its primary theoretical framework for analyzing audience responses to media texts, including films. Breaking away from traditional semiology, Hall recognized that meaning is not fixed but depends on the interaction between media producers and audiences. He introduced the concept of preferred meaning, arguing that media creators encode messages with intended interpretations, but these meanings are only fully realized if audiences decode them in alignment with the intended message (Hodkinson, P., 2017)⁵. Hall outlined three decoding positions: the dominant-hegemonic position, where audiences fully accept the intended meaning; the negotiated position, where they partly accept but reinterpret certain aspects; and the oppositional position, where they reject or challenge the message. In analyzing audience responses to *The Silent Child*, the research integrates discussions of the film within a broader context of shifting cultural and ideological boundaries (Biltereyst, D., & Meers, P., 2016).⁶ This approach considers cross-cultural influences and examines how Indonesian students'

interpretations are shaped by local norms while engaging with a narrative rooted in a different cultural setting.

Methodology

This research employs a qualitative approach, drawing on Stuart Hall's Encoding and Decoding theory to explore how Indonesian students interpret *The Silent Child* (2017) through their cultural lens. The study takes place in a classroom setting at Rumah Bahasa Surabaya, involving 8 students who participated in a film discussion session. The participants, ranging in age from 18 to 35, have different levels of English proficiency and were enrolled in the "Audience Response Analysis" class facilitated by the author. To gather data, a structured questionnaire was distributed, focusing on students' perspectives on the film's portrayal of deafness, communication challenges, and inclusive education. The questionnaire consisted of both multiple-choice and open-ended questions, allowing students to articulate their thoughts, emotions, and cultural interpretations. The responses were analyzed using thematic analysis, identifying key patterns in audience reception. This method provided insight into how the film's message was understood within the Indonesian context, offering a broader perspective on the intersection of media representation, disability awareness, and cultural norms.

Results

Based on the research conducted on eight respondents, the findings reveal key insights into their demographic profiles, occupations, and perceptions after watching *The Silent Child*. The age and gender distribution showed an even split between male and female participants, with ages ranging from 18 to 35 (Table 1). Respondents came from diverse occupational backgrounds, with the highest representation from freelancers, followed by unemployed individuals (Table 2).

Table 3 shows that the majority of respondents were aware of the challenges faced by individuals with hearing impairments, with four respondents already understanding their challenges and four respondents becoming more aware of the difficulties they faced.

Table 4 shows that all of the respondents acknowledge the role of sign language in the film as a primary means of communication and central to the story.

Table 5 above shows that all the respondents acknowledge the importance of inclusive education for children with disabilities, with seven respondents believing that it can change lives and a respondent believing that it is important but is not always necessary.

Table 6 shows that all the respondents gained a better understanding of communication in English, with two respondents making them rethink the importance of listening and understanding in communication and six

respondents realizing that communication is much more than just language.

Table 7 shows that all of the respondents perceived that many moments in the film helped them understand the power of empathy and connection in communication.

Table 8 shows that the majority the six respondents acknowledge the silence in the film as an emotional connection to the character, and two respondents did not feel connected to the character due to the silence.

Table 9 shows that the majority of six respondents consider that the film shows effective ways of communicating with people with limited verbal skills, and two respondents consider that there are other methods that could be explored.

Table 10 shows that the majority of the six respondents acknowledge that the film's message of language is essential in forming strong, meaningful relationships, while a respondent considers that language is important but does not always define a relationship, and a respondent consider that the film does not emphasize language in relationship.

Table 11 shows that the majority of respondents are interested in learning more about sign language, with two respondents wanting to learn immediately, four respondents want to learn later, and two respondents not feeling the need to learn other communication methods.

Table 12 shows that half of the respondents are encouraged to be more patient with others who communicate differently and the other half to understand various communication styles.

Table 13 shows that the majority the respondents are really likely to recommend the film to others, and three respondents would recommend the film to others.

Table 1.Age and Gender Distribution of Respondents

Age	Male	Female	Total	Percentage
18	1	1	2	25%
21	1	0	1	12.5%
22	1	1	2	25%
30	0	1	1	12.5%
35	1	1	2	25%
Total	4	4	8	100%

(Source: Primary Data, 2025)

Table 2.Occupation Distribution of Respondents

Occupations	Total	Percentage
Freelance	3	37,5%
Office Employee	1	12,5%
College Student	1	12,5%
Entrepreneur	1	12,5%

Unemployed	2	25%
Total	8	100%

(Source: Primary Data, 2025)

Table 3. Responses to the Question “How did The Silent Child change your perspective on the challenges faced by individuals with hearing impairments?”

Response	Total	Percentage
It made me more aware of the difficulties they face	4	50%
I already understood the challenges, but the film deepened my understanding	4	50%
I did not learn anything new	0	0%
I was unaware of these challenges before watching the film	0	0%
Total	8	100%

(Source: Primary Data, 2025)

Table 4. Responses to the Question “What role did non-verbal communication (like sign language) play in the film?”

Response	Total	Percentage
It was the primary means of communication and central to the story	8	100%
It was used occasionally, but not crucial to the plot	0	0%
It seemed unnecessary to the story	0	0%
I didn't notice its importance	0	0%
Total	8	100%

(Source: Primary Data, 2025)

Table 5. Responses to the Question “In your opinion, how important is inclusive education for children with disabilities, based on the film?”

Response	Total	Percentage
Extremely important; it can change lives	7	87,5%
Somewhat important; it could help but isn't always necessary	1	12,5%
Not very important; other forms of education work better	0	0%
I didn't see it as an important theme in the film	0	0%
TOTAL	8	100%

(Source: Primary Data, 2025)

Table 6. Responses to the Question “How did the film affect your understanding of communication in English?”

Response	Total	Percentage
It made me realize that communication is much more than just language	6	75%
It made me rethink the importance of listening and understanding in communication	2	25%
It reinforced my understanding that language is the main form of communication	0	0%
I didn't think it impacted my understanding of communication	0	0%
Total	8	100%

(Source: Primary Data, 2025)

Table 7. Shows that all of the respondents perceived that many moments in the film helped them understand the power of empathy and connection in communication

Response	Total	Percentage
Yes, many moments showed empathy and connection	8	100%
Yes, but only a few moments stood out	0	0%
No, empathy was not a major theme in the film	0	0%
I didn't notice any moments of empathy	0	0%
Total	8	100%

(Source: Primary Data, 2025)

Table 8. Responses to the Question “How did the use of silence in the film impact your emotional connection with the characters?”

Response	Total	Percentage
It made the experience more emotional and relatable	6	75%
I didn't feel particularly connected due to the silence	2	25%
It made the story harder to follow but still impactful	0	0%

It made the film less engaging for me	0	0%
Total	8	100%

Table 9. Responses to the Question “Do you think the film shows effective ways of communicating with people who are non-verbal or have limited verbal skills?”

Response	Total	Percentage
Yes, it showed how sign language and other methods can work effectively	6	75%
Somewhat, but I think there are other methods that could be explored	2	25%
No, I didn't see any effective communication strategies	0	0%
I don't know enough about communication methods to judge	0	0%
Total	8	100%

(Source: Primary Data, 2025)

Table 10. Responses to the Question “What message do you think the film conveys about the importance of language in building relationships”

Response	Total	Percentage
Language is essential in forming strong, meaningful relationships	6	75%
Language is important but doesn't always define a relationship	1	12,5%
I didn't feel the film emphasized language in relationships	1	12,5%
Relationships can be built without the need for language	0	0%
Total	8	100%

(Source: Primary Data, 2025)

Table 11. Responses to the Question “After watching the film, do you feel more motivated to learn sign language or other alternative communication methods”

Response	Total	Percentage
I'm interested in learning more, but not immediately	4	50%
Yes, I would like to learn more about sign language	2	25%

No, I don't feel motivated to learn other communication methods	2	25%
I'm already learning sign language or other communication methods	0	0%
Total	8	100%

(Source: Primary Data, 2025)

Table 12. Responses to the Question “How can the lessons from "The Silent Child" be applied to your own learning process, especially in terms of understanding diverse ways of communication”

Response	Total	Percentage
It encouraged me to be more patient with others who communicate differently	4	50%
It made me more open to understanding various communication styles	4	50%
I didn't find the lessons relevant to my learning process	0	0%
It didn't affect my views on communication in learning	0	0%
Total	8	100%

Table 13. Responses to the Question “How likely are you to recommend this film to others?”

Response	Total	Percentage
5	5	62,5%
4	3	37,5%
3	0	0%
2	0	0%
1	0	0%
Total	8	100%

Discussion

Dominant-Hegemonic Position: Accepting the Film's Message

Most students agreed with the film's core ideas. The results show that:

- Everyone (100%) recognized that sign language played a central role in the story.
- Nearly all (87.5%) believed that inclusive education is essential for children with disabilities.
- A majority (75%) of participants thought the film highlighted how important language is in building relationships.

This suggests that many students fully accepted what the film was trying to say. They connected with Libby's struggles and saw sign language as a key part of breaking communication barriers. Since the film tells its story in a very emotional way, especially through the silent moments, it is not surprising that it had a strong impact on the audience.

Negotiated Position: Agreeing, but with Some Adaptations

Some students agreed with the film's message but had their take on it. For example:

- Half (50%) said the film didn't necessarily introduce new ideas to them but helped them understand deafness on a deeper level.
- A quarter (25%) said they realized communication is about more than just language.

These responses show that while students saw the importance of sign language, they were also thinking about how the situation applies to Indonesia. In Indonesia, oralism, teaching deaf individuals to speak rather than use sign language, is still the dominant approach in education. This makes it harder to apply the film's ideas directly to their society. Instead of simply accepting the film's message as universal, students were filtering it through their cultural knowledge and experiences.

Oppositional Position: Questioning the Film's Perspective

While no students completely rejected the film's message, a few responses showed some hesitation:

- A quarter (25%) said they weren't particularly motivated to learn sign language after watching the film.
- Some (12.5%) believed that while language is important, it doesn't always define relationships.

This suggests that while students understood the challenges faced by the deaf community, not all of them felt personally connected to the issue. In Indonesia, spoken communication is highly valued, and sign language is not as widely accepted as in some Western countries. Because of this, some students may have viewed the film's strong focus on sign language as less relevant to their own experiences.

Understanding Communication Beyond Spoken Language

The responses also indicate that the film encouraged participants to reconsider their understanding of communication.

- 75% stated that they realized communication is much more than just language
- 25% stated that the film made them reflect on the importance of listening and understanding

These responses suggest that the film successfully conveyed the idea that communication is not solely dependent on spoken words. The way individuals listen, observe, and respond plays an equally important role in meaningful interaction. The film illustrates this concept by highlighting the protagonist's attempts to connect with others despite the communication barriers she faces.

Emotional Engagement and Its Influence on Action

The strong emotional response to the film does not necessarily translate into direct action. The results show that:

- 50% expressed interest in learning sign language but not immediately
- 25% stated a desire to learn more about sign language right away
- 25% felt no motivation to learn alternative communication methods

These findings indicate that while the film was effective in fostering empathy, it did not necessarily lead all participants to take further steps toward action. Emotional engagement is an important starting point for raising awareness, but long-term change often requires additional education, policy changes, and social initiatives. The responses demonstrate how visual storytelling can foster empathy and reshape perspectives on communication. The use of silence and non-verbal cues made the film more immersive, allowing participants to connect emotionally with the protagonist's experiences. Many participants gained a deeper appreciation for the challenges faced by deaf individuals and recognized the importance of communication beyond spoken language. However, while the film successfully evoked empathy, the level of motivation to take further action varied among participants, showing that emotional connection alone does not always lead to immediate change.

Understanding the Film Through Local Contexts

While the film presents a universal message about the struggles of deaf individuals, the way participants interpreted it was influenced by their own cultural experiences. The results indicate that:

- Half of the participants stated that the film deepened their understanding of the challenges faced by individuals with hearing impairments, rather than introducing entirely new concepts
- 25% believed that communication extends beyond language, suggesting an awareness of alternative interaction methods beyond sign language

These responses suggest that participants were already familiar with the issues presented in the film but processed them through their cultural framework. Audiences differ

in their relation to the culture and places depicted in films, which can show a variety of meaning-making (Portegies, A., 2010) [9]. The focus on sign language as a primary mode of communication in *The Silent Child* may not entirely align with educational practices in Indonesia, where oralism remains the dominant approach for deaf education. While the film promotes sign language as an essential tool for inclusion, the participants' responses reflect a negotiation between the film's intended message and the realities of their cultural environment.

The Influence of Cultural Norms on Audience Reception

As discussed in the Encoding/Decoding model within reception studies, certain audience interpretations of media texts do not simply accept the dominant reading but actively challenge or resist it. These power dynamics, which occur among various societal interest groups, often manifest in the realm of symbolic power. In many Western countries, sign language is legally recognized and integrated into education systems, while in Indonesia, efforts to promote sign language still face institutional and cultural resistance. The difference in policy and practice influences how viewers interpret the film's portrayal of inclusive education, as audience response is shaped by existing social norms and policies (Livingstone, S., & Das, R., 2013) [10]. The responses indicate that while participants supported the film's message about the importance of sign language, some viewed its applicability within an Indonesian context as limited.

Film as a Medium for Cross-Cultural Engagement

Despite differences in interpretation, the film successfully created engagement and discussion about communication and disability rights. Films are a powerful medium for portraying the condition and ambiguities associated with some cultures, which helps students to understand the theories they learn in a classroom (Desai, S. V., Jabeen, S. S., Abdul, W. K., & Rao, S. A., 2018) [11]. A universal theme, such as the struggle for inclusion, can resonate across cultures even if the specific solutions presented in the film do not entirely align with local practices. Also, through the storyline, characters, themes, language and dialects, the audiences can see many elements associated with a culture just in a single frame. The results indicate that:

- 50 % of participants expressed interest in learning sign language, though not immediately
- 25% stated a stronger motivation to learn more about sign language
- Another 25% did not feel motivated to explore alternative communication methods

The responses demonstrate that cultural background plays a significant role in how audiences interpret films. *The Silent Child* presents a global narrative on communication barriers and disability rights, but the way participants engaged with its themes was shaped by their local experiences. While many agreed with the film's message, some negotiated or reinterpreted its implications within an Indonesian context, particularly regarding the role of sign language in education. This reflects how cultural transfer allows global narratives to be adapted and understood through local perspectives, creating a complex interaction between film reception and cultural identity.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study highlights how Indonesian students interpret *The Silent Child* (2017) through the lens of their cultural background, revealing the dynamic process of meaning-making in media reception. While many students aligned with the film's intended message about the importance of sign language and inclusive education, others negotiated or challenged its relevance within the Indonesian context, where oralism remains dominant. Stuart Hall's Encoding/Decoding Theory provides a valuable framework for understanding these varying responses, demonstrating that audience reception is not passive but is shaped by social and ideological factors. The emotional engagement created through the film's use of silence and visual storytelling played a significant role in fostering empathy, yet this did not always translate into a willingness to take action, such as learning sign language. The findings also emphasize the complexities of cultural transfer as students balanced global narratives on disability rights with local norms and educational practices. Ultimately, this research reaffirms the idea that films are powerful tools for shaping perspectives, but their impact depends on the audience's ability to interpret, negotiate, and sometimes resist the messages they convey.

Authors' Contribution: Both Cysakaren Diva Pratiwi and Dewi Meyrasyawati equally contributed to all stages of the research, including data collection and analysis, data acquisition, statistical evaluation, research conceptualization and design, manuscript preparation, and critical revision of the final draft.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process: None

Conflict of Interest: No conflict of interest

Source of Funding: None

References

1. Lupyan G, Abdel Rahman R, Boroditsky L, Clark A. Effects of language on visual perception. *Trends Cogn Sci*.

- 2020;24(11):930–44. doi:10.1016/j.tics.2020.08.005.
2. Phillips P. Spectator, audience and response. In: Nelmes J, editor. *Introduction to film studies*. 5th ed. New York: Routledge; 2012.
3. D'Aloia A. Film in depth. Water and immersivity in the contemporary film experience [Internet]. 2012 [cited 2025 Apr 5]. Available from: <https://aisberg.unibg.it/retrieve/e40f7b89-d3cd-afca-e053-6605fe0aeaf2/Film%20in%20Depth.pdf#page=6>
4. Paxton RJ, Marcus AS. Film media in history teaching and learning. In: Metzger SC, Harris LM, editors. *The Wiley international handbook of history teaching and learning*. Hoboken: Wiley Blackwell; 2018.
5. Hodgkinson P. *Media, culture and society: an introduction*. 2nd ed. London: SAGE; 2017.
6. Biltereyst D, Meers P. New cinema history and the comparative mode: Reflections on comparing historical cinema cultures. In: Maltby R, Biltereyst D, Meers P, editors. *Explorations in new cinema history*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell; 2011.
7. Shaw A. Encoding and decoding affordances: Stuart Hall and interactive media technologies. *Media Cult Soc*. 2017;39(4):592–602.
8. Herman R, Morgan G. *Deafness, language & communication*. London: Whurr Publishers; 2010.
9. Portegies A. Places on my mind: Exploring contextuality in film in between the global and the local. *Tour Hosp Plan Dev*. 2010;7(1):47–58.
10. Livingstone S, Das R. Interpretation/reception. In: Nightingale V, editor. *The handbook of media audiences*. Malden: Wiley-Blackwell; 2013. p. 104–19.
11. Desai SV, Jabeen SS, Abdul WK, Rao SA. Teaching cross-cultural management: A flipped classroom approach using films. *Int J Manag Educ*. 2018;16(3):405–31.