

Exploring Gender Issues Through Vocabulary Learning in Barbie (2023)

Rusydi Muhammad Yusuf

Universitas Darma Persada-Jakarta, Indonesia

Article Info

Article history:

Accepted: 26 Juni 2026

Publish: 01 Agustus 2026

Keywords:

gender discourse,
vocabulary learning,
EFL learners,
Barbie (2023),
critical language awareness.

Abstract

This study investigates how gender issues represented in Barbie (2023) contribute to vocabulary learning among English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. Using a qualitative descriptive approach, the research analyzes selected dialogues from the film to identify gender-related vocabulary and examine their contextual meanings within the narrative. The study focuses on lexical items associated with themes such as gender stereotypes, patriarchy, empowerment, identity, equality, and self-expression. The findings reveal that the film provides rich and authentic exposure to gender discourse, enabling learners to understand vocabulary beyond its literal meaning by exploring connotations, ideological implications, and sociocultural contexts. Furthermore, the dialogues demonstrate how lexical meanings shift according to context, allowing learners to develop deeper vocabulary knowledge and critical language awareness. The study also highlights the pedagogical value of film-based learning in promoting engagement, contextualized vocabulary acquisition, and cultural literacy. Overall, Barbie (2023) serves as an effective resource for integrating vocabulary learning with critical discussions of gender and social issues in EFL classrooms.

This is an open access article under the [Lisensi Creative Commons Atribusi-BerbagiSerupa 4.0 Internasional](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/)



Corresponding Author:

Rusydi M. Yusuf

Universitas Darma Persada-Jakarta, Indonesia

Email Coresspondent: eremye@gmail.com

1. INTRODUCTION

In contemporary language education, vocabulary learning is increasingly understood as a socio-cultural process rather than mere memorization of lexical items. Within this perspective, learners do not simply acquire word meanings in isolation; instead, they interpret vocabulary through interaction with cultural, social, and ideological contexts. (Liu, et al., 2025) Scholars in applied linguistics emphasize that vocabulary knowledge is deeply connected to *cultural literacy*, enabling learners to understand how language reflects values, beliefs, and power relations in society. (Nation, 2022) (Schmitt & Schmitt, 2020) In this sense, language is not neutral but functions as a medium through which identities and social structures—including gender—are constructed and negotiated.

Gender issues, in particular, are deeply embedded in language use. Research in language and gender demonstrates that lexical choices often reinforce or challenge dominant gender ideologies. (Legaspi & Torres, 2026) Words and expressions can encode assumptions about masculinity, femininity, and social roles, making vocabulary an important site of ideological meaning. (Baxter, 2015) From the perspective of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), language plays a central role in shaping social realities, including gender hierarchies and power relations. (Xiao & Li, 2021) (Avdagić & Džanić, 2023.) CDA scholars argue that discourse not only reflects but also reproduces inequality, which is often embedded in everyday language practices. Therefore, examining vocabulary in context allows learners to uncover implicit meanings related to gender and power.

In the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), integrating gender awareness into vocabulary learning has been shown to enhance both linguistic competence and critical thinking. Studies indicate that learners benefit from exposure to authentic materials that reflect real-world social issues, as these materials provide meaningful contexts for vocabulary acquisition (Webb & Nation, 2017) (Topal, 2025) Film, in particular, is recognized as a powerful pedagogical tool because it combines visual, auditory, and narrative elements that facilitate comprehension and engagement. Through film, learners encounter vocabulary in natural discourse, enabling them to understand not only denotative meanings but also connotations and pragmatic functions. (Sánchez, et al., 2023)

The film *Barbie*, directed by Greta Gerwig, offers a contemporary and culturally relevant representation of gender discourse. As a globally popular film, it presents complex portrayals of gender relations, including critiques of patriarchy, stereotypes, and identity formation. The narrative juxtaposes the fictional world of Barbie land with the real world, highlighting contrasting gender systems and exposing the constructed nature of gender roles. Recent studies have shown that the film addresses issues such as gender inequality, objectification, and female empowerment through its characters and dialogue (Banet & Weiser, 2018). These themes are communicated not only through visual representation but also through carefully constructed language, making the film a rich source for vocabulary learning.

From a linguistic perspective, vocabulary in *Barbie* is not merely functional but ideological. Lexical choices such as power, control, independence, and identity carry significant socio-cultural meanings that reflect broader gender discourses. Research on lexical semantics and discourse analysis highlights that vocabulary can encode ideological positions and influence how learners perceive social realities. (Baker, 2018) By analyzing such vocabulary in context, learners can develop a deeper understanding of how language operates within systems of power and representation.

Furthermore, the use of humor, satire, and irony in *Barbie* adds another layer of complexity to vocabulary learning. These linguistic features require learners to interpret meaning beyond the literal level, fostering higher-order thinking skills. Studies suggest that exposure to figurative and context-dependent language enhances learners' interpretive abilities and supports long-term retention of vocabulary. (Yu & Boers, 2023) In this way, the film not only provides lexical input but also encourages critical engagement with language and meaning.

Importantly, integrating gender issues into vocabulary learning aligns with current educational goals that emphasize critical literacy. Critical literacy encourages learners to question and analyze the social implications of language use, including issues of inequality and representation (Veliza & Farias, 2024). By engaging with gender-related vocabulary in *Barbie*, learners can develop awareness of how language shapes and reflects societal norms, thereby becoming more informed and critical language users.

Therefore, analyzing vocabulary within gender contexts in *Barbie* provides a valuable opportunity to integrate language learning with cultural and critical awareness. This approach moves beyond traditional vocabulary instruction by situating language within meaningful social contexts, enabling learners to connect linguistic knowledge with real-world issues. It also supports the development of intercultural competence, which is essential in today's globalized world.

This study aims to explore how gender issues presented in *Barbie* contribute to vocabulary learning and how learners can develop both linguistic competence and gender awareness through film-based learning. By examining the intersection of language, gender, and culture, this research seeks to contribute to culturally responsive language teaching and the use of media in vocabulary acquisition.

This study aims to explore how gender issues presented in *Barbie* contribute to vocabulary learning and how learners can develop both linguistic competence and gender awareness through

film-based learning. By examining the intersection of language, gender, and culture, this research seeks to contribute to the growing body of literature on culturally responsive language teaching and the role of media in vocabulary acquisition.

2. METHOD

This research employs a qualitative descriptive design to investigate how gender issues represented in Barbie contribute to vocabulary learning. Qualitative approaches are particularly suitable for examining language in context, as they allow for in-depth interpretation of meaning, discourse, and social implications embedded in authentic materials (Creswell & Poth, 2017). The primary data source of this study is the film itself, with a focus on selected dialogues that explicitly and implicitly represent gender-related themes.

Data Collection

Data were collected through repeated and careful viewing of the film to ensure familiarity with both narrative structure and linguistic content. This iterative viewing process is recommended in discourse-based studies to enhance accuracy and depth of interpretation (O'Halloran, et al., 2015). The researcher identified key scenes that reflect central gender issues, including:

1. Gender Stereotypes
2. Patriarchy And Power Relations
3. Identity And Self-Expression

Dialogues from these scenes were transcribed verbatim and organized into thematic categories. This thematic categorization aligns with qualitative content analysis, which enables researchers to systematically classify and interpret patterns of meaning within textual data (Jr., 2025). The selected excerpts were chosen based on their relevance to gender discourse and their potential contribution to vocabulary learning.

Data Analysis

The study employed multiple analytical frameworks to ensure a comprehensive interpretation of the data. First, **Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)** was applied to examine how language constructs and reflects gender relations and power structures. CDA emphasizes the role of discourse in reproducing social inequalities and is widely used in gender-related linguistic studies (Sriwimon & Zilli, 2017).

Second, **Language and Gender Theory** was used to interpret gendered linguistic patterns, focusing on how lexical choices reflect identity, roles, and social expectations. Contemporary research highlights that vocabulary is closely tied to ideological meanings and social positioning (Bigler & Leaper, 2015).

Third, **Semiotic Analysis** was employed to explore symbolic meanings conveyed through language and visual elements. This approach allows for the interpretation of signs, metaphors, and cultural symbols that contribute to meaning-making in film discourse. (Agustiawan, 2024)

Vocabulary items were analyzed based on three dimensions:

1. Lexical Meaning,
2. Contextual, And
3. Socio-Cultural Implication.

This multi-layered analysis is consistent with current vocabulary research, which emphasizes the importance of context and usage in developing deeper lexical knowledge (Schmitt & Schmitt, 2020)

Additionally, the study examined how exposure to gender-related vocabulary in meaningful contexts may influence learners' comprehension and retention. Research in second language acquisition suggests that vocabulary learned through authentic and context-rich input, such as films, is more likely to be retained and understood at a deeper level (Peters & Webb, 2018) By integrating discourse analysis with vocabulary learning, this method provides a holistic understanding of how language, gender, and culture interact in the learning process.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal that Barbie provides a rich and multidimensional linguistic environment for exploring gender-related vocabulary within meaningful socio-cultural contexts. The film not only presents a wide range of lexical items associated with gender discourse but also situates these items within narratives that reflect power relations, identity formation, and ideological tension. As a result, vocabulary learning in this context extends beyond surface-level meaning and enters the domain of critical literacy, where learners interpret language as a carrier of cultural and social significance.

Through qualitative analysis of selected dialogues and scenes, several key themes emerged, demonstrating how vocabulary in the film contributes to both linguistic development and gender awareness. These themes include gender stereotypes, patriarchy and power discourse, empowerment and identity, irony and satire in language use, and pedagogical implications for vocabulary learning.

GENDER STEREOTYPES

The lexical items *beautiful*, *perfect*, *ideal*, and *extraordinary* are repeatedly associated with the identity of Barbie characters in Barbieland. A significant example appears in Gloria's speech when she addresses Barbie:

"You are so beautiful and so smart, and it kills me that you don't think you're good enough."

Near the end of *Barbie* (2023), Gloria speaks to Stereotypical Barbie at Mattel headquarters after their return from the Real World. In this significant scene, Gloria says, *"You are so beautiful and so smart, and it kills me that you don't think you're good enough."* Although *beautiful* and *smart* are typically positive adjectives associated with admiration and achievement, their use in this context highlights the social pressures women experience to meet multiple expectations simultaneously, revealing deeper issues of gender norms, self-worth, and societal standards. This dialogue demonstrates how lexical meaning extends beyond dictionary definitions. While *beautiful* conventionally carries a positive connotation, within the narrative it also indexes social pressure and unattainable standards of femininity.

The Ideology of Extraordinary Femininity

Another important dialogue illustrating idealized femininity occurs in the same speech:

"We have to always be extraordinary, but somehow we're always doing it wrong."

In the film's final act at Mattel headquarters, Gloria criticizes the unrealistic and contradictory expectations imposed on women. Through her conversation with Barbie, she highlights how society demands women to be simultaneously beautiful, intelligent, successful, and perfect, exposing the pressures of conforming to multiple gendered ideals. The adjective *extraordinary* initially appears positive; however, the surrounding context transforms its meaning into a symbol of impossible social expectations. This supports the argument that lexical meaning is context-dependent rather than fixed.

Questioning the Myth of Perfection

The turning point of the narrative occurs when Barbie suddenly disrupts the harmonious atmosphere of Barbieland by asking:

"Do you guys ever think about dying?"

Early in the film, during an evening dance celebration in Barbieland, Stereotypical Barbie unexpectedly asks the other Barbies, "Do you guys ever think about dying?", marking the beginning of her existential crisis. This moment disrupts the seemingly perfect atmosphere of Barbieland and initiates Barbie's journey of self-discovery and identity transformation. Although the utterance does not explicitly contain gendered vocabulary, it initiates the semantic shift from *perfect Barbie* toward a more human and imperfect identity. The dialogue destabilizes the idealized lexical frame that has previously defined Barbie's existence.

Recontextualization of "Weird" and "Different"

When Barbie seeks help, Weird Barbie explains her unusual social status:

"I'm not Stereotypical Barbie."

Shortly after Barbie develops flat feet and begins experiencing unusual changes that disrupt her perfect existence in Barbieland, she visits Weird Barbie at Weird Barbie's house. As an outsider who deviates from conventional beauty standards, Weird Barbie explains her unique condition and guides Barbie toward understanding her identity crisis. The labels *weird*, *different*, and *imperfect* initially carry negative connotations within Barbieland. However, the narrative later reframes these words as indicators of authenticity, individuality, and freedom from rigid social expectations.

Gendered Vocabulary and Ken's Transformation

At the beginning of the film, Ken's identity is defined through dependence on Barbie. His social role revolves around gaining Barbie's attention and recognition. After entering the Real World, however, Ken becomes fascinated with patriarchal discourse and adopts vocabulary related to masculine authority such as *power*, *control*, *leadership*, and *patriarch*, a representative line is:

"I'm a liberated man. I know crying is not weak."

Near the end of the film, after the collapse of Kendom in Barbieland, Ken (Ryan Gosling) begins reconstructing his identity during the resolution stage of the narrative. In this scene, he reflects on his previous dependence on patriarchal power and starts understanding that his self-worth should be defined independently of dominance, status, or authority. This lexical transformation illustrates how language reflects changing ideological positions. Ken's vocabulary evolves from dependency to dominance and finally toward self-awareness, supporting Critical Discourse Analysis perspectives on language and power.

PATRIARCHY AND POWER RELATIONS

Another significant theme identified in this study is the representation of patriarchy and power through language in *Barbie* (2023). The film employs a wide range of vocabulary such as *authority*, *leadership*, *dominance*, *control*, *power*, and *status* to depict hierarchical gender relations, particularly in scenes where male characters begin to assert influence over social structures. These lexical items are not randomly selected; rather, they function as discursive tools that reflect and construct ideological meanings related to gender and power.

From the perspective of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), language plays a central role in shaping and maintaining systems of dominance (Kaposi & Richardson, 2017). In this framework, vocabulary is not neutral but embedded with ideological significance. A notable example occurs when Ken discovers the concept of patriarchy in the Real World and enthusiastically declares:

"The patriarchy isn't about horses. It's about men and power."

Shortly after arriving in the Real World, Ken (Ryan Gosling) observes male-dominated social institutions at Venice Beach and various locations in Los Angeles, California. Speaking initially to himself and later to the other Kens, he becomes fascinated by the association between masculinity, authority, and social status. This scene occurs around the midpoint of the film and marks a turning point in Ken's identity development, as he begins to internalize patriarchal values and equate male power with leadership, control, and societal influence. masculinity with authority and social control. The lexical item *power* becomes central to his emerging identity and serves as a symbolic marker of patriarchal ideology.

This dialogue demonstrates how vocabulary can function as a vehicle for ideological learning. Through exposure to a new social environment, Ken internalizes the discourse of patriarchy and reproduces it upon returning to Barbieland.

Initially, the language used in Barbieland emphasizes equality, harmony, and collective identity. However, as patriarchal ideas are introduced, the vocabulary shifts toward competition, hierarchy, and dominance. This linguistic transformation becomes evident when Ken attempts to justify the new social order:

"The Kens have to start holding positions of power if we're ever going to achieve equality."

At the beginning of the Kendom transformation in Barbieland, shortly after returning from the Real World, Ken addresses the other Kens and Barbies while attempting to institutionalize a new social order based on patriarchal values. In this context, he promotes positions of power and authority as necessary and legitimate, presenting male leadership as a natural solution to social organization. Through his language, Ken seeks to normalize hierarchical gender relations, revealing how discourse can subtly legitimize inequality while simultaneously framing dominance as a form of fairness, progress, and social balance. The character of Ken plays a crucial role in this shift. Upon encountering patriarchal structures in the Real World, he adopts vocabulary that reflects his internalization of these ideologies. Words such as *power*, *respect*, and *control* become central to his identity, signaling a shift from marginalization to dominance. This aligns with research suggesting that language is a key medium through which individuals construct and negotiate identity within social hierarchies (Litosseliti, 2013)

Furthermore, the film highlights how patriarchal language often operates subtly through normalization. Terms like *leader* and *boss* are presented as desirable and natural positions for male characters. A clear example occurs when Ken proudly announces:

"I'm going to beach off right here." (Ken introducing his elevated social status)

Although humorous, this recurring expression symbolizes Ken's attempt to establish masculine prestige and social visibility.

In the early part of the film, before the journey to the Real World, Ken is seen at Barbieland Beach expressing his constant desire for Barbie's attention and recognition. This setting highlights his marginalized social position and foreshadows his later attraction to patriarchal structures, where male authority, status, and leadership are socially validated and rewarded. The association between leadership and masculinity becomes more explicit after the creation of Kendom. In one scene, Kens occupy positions previously held by Barbies, while language related to governance, command, and authority becomes increasingly common. This reflects broader societal patterns in which leadership is linguistically and culturally associated with masculinity. Studies in discourse and gender have shown that such associations are reinforced through repeated lexical patterns that privilege male authority (Baker, 2018).

In addition, the film demonstrates how language can be used to legitimize inequality. Vocabulary related to patriarchy is frequently framed in ways that justify dominance by linking authority with competence and control with social order. This ideological function becomes visible when Ken enthusiastically explains his new worldview:

"I learned the secret of the patriarchy."

Immediately after returning from the Real World to Barbieland, Ken enthusiastically shared his newly acquired understanding of patriarchy with Stereotypical Barbie and the other Kens. In this scene, set in Barbieland during the middle of the film, Ken presents patriarchy as valuable knowledge capable of elevating his social status, increasing his influence, and granting him greater power within society. The phrase *secret of the patriarchy* frames male dominance as something desirable, powerful, and worthy of emulation.

This reflects what van Dijk describes as the ideological function of discourse, whereby language is used to maintain social inequality by presenting it as natural or beneficial (Kaposi & Richardson, 2017). In *Barbie*, this process is made visible through the rapid transformation of Barbieland, where patriarchal norms become institutionalized through repeated linguistic practices.

Another powerful example appears near the end of the film when Barbie challenges Ken's dependence on patriarchal identity:

"You are Ken." (Barbie to Ken)

followed by:

"It's Barbie and it's Ken." (Barbie)

Near the conclusion of *Barbie* (2023), during the resolution of the conflict in Barbieland, Barbie (Margot Robbie) speaks to Ken as he struggles with an identity crisis following the collapse of Kendom. In this pivotal scene, Barbie rejects hierarchical and power-based definitions of identity by telling Ken, “You are Ken,” encouraging him to develop a sense of self independent of dominance, status, or social power. The conversation takes place in Barbieland after the restoration of social balance, where language functions as a tool of empowerment, self-discovery, and personal liberation rather than control and authority. From a pedagogical perspective, exposure to such vocabulary provides valuable opportunities for learners to understand how abstract concepts like power and inequality are expressed linguistically. Rather than learning words in isolation, learners encounter them within meaningful contexts that illustrate their social implications. Research in second-language acquisition emphasizes that contextualized vocabulary learning enhances both comprehension and retention, particularly when learners engage with authentic materials (Peters & Webb, 2018)

Moreover, engaging with patriarchal discourse in the film encourages critical language awareness. Learners are required to interpret not only the literal meaning of words but also their connotations and ideological implications. This aligns with the concept of critical literacy, which emphasizes the ability to analyze and question the power dynamics embedded in language. (Luke, 2018).

The film also employs humor and satire to critique patriarchal discourse. Ken's exaggerated enthusiasm for concepts such as patriarchy, dominance, and authority serves as a parody of real-world gender hierarchies. This satirical representation encourages viewers to recognize the absurdity of systems that privilege one gender over another. According to Boers (Boers, 2021), exposure to figurative and non-literal language enhances learners' interpretive abilities and contributes to deeper vocabulary acquisition.

In summary, the representation of patriarchy and power discourse in *Barbie* illustrates how language functions as a tool for constructing, legitimizing, and challenging social hierarchies. Through characters such as Ken, the film demonstrates how vocabulary related to authority, leadership, and control can shape identity and reinforce ideological systems. At the same time, the narrative ultimately critiques these structures, encouraging audiences to question the assumptions embedded in gendered language. Consequently, the film provides a valuable resource for vocabulary learning that integrates linguistic competence, cultural understanding, and critical awareness.

IDENTITY AND SELF-EXPRESSION

The theme of empowerment is central to *Barbie* (2023) and is prominently reflected in vocabulary related to identity, self-expression, and personal agency. Throughout the film, lexical items such as *independent*, *confident*, *self-worth*, *voice*, *choice*, and *freedom* are strategically employed to depict the transformation of female characters as they confront and challenge societal expectations. These words are not merely descriptive; rather, they function as ideological markers that signal a shift from passive conformity to active self-determination.

From a linguistic perspective, such vocabulary carries strong positive connotations and is closely associated with empowerment discourse. These lexical items construct meanings that emphasize autonomy, resilience, and personal identity. In the narrative, the protagonist's journey from a seemingly “perfect” yet constrained identity toward a more complex and self-aware individual is mediated through changes in language use.

One of the most significant examples occurs near the conclusion of the film when Barbie decides to leave Barbieland and embrace human existence. Ruth Handler, the creator of Barbie, tells her:

“You don't need my permission.”

In the final act of the film, within a transitional dream-like space between Barbieland and the human world, Ruth Handler speaks to Barbie, who is seeking reassurance about her decision to become

human. Rather than directing or persuading her, Ruth emphasizes Barbie's autonomy and freedom of choice by stating, "You don't need my permission." This moment marks a pivotal stage in Barbie's identity development, highlighting themes of self-determination, personal agency, and empowerment as she prepares to choose her own future independently. The lexical implication of *permission* is significant. By stating that Barbie does not need permission, Ruth symbolically transfers authority from external institutions to the individual self. This dialogue reinforces empowerment through the discourse of personal agency and self-determination.

Another important example occurs during Barbie's existential transformation when she declares:

"I want to be part of the people that make meaning, not the thing that is made."

At the climax of the narrative, Barbie speaks to Ruth Handler in a transitional space between Barbieland and the Real World. In this pivotal moment, Barbie rejects her identity as a manufactured doll and expresses her desire to become a human being capable of creating her own meaning and destiny. The conversation symbolizes her transformation from a passive object shaped by others into an autonomous individual who actively constructs and defines her own identity.

This statement contains powerful agentive language through the verb *make*. Rather than remaining a passive object, Barbie expresses the desire to become an active creator of meaning. Linguistically, the contrast between *make meaning* and *thing that is made* highlights the shift from passivity to agency, illustrating how vocabulary can construct identity through discourse.

Moreover, the film situates empowerment vocabulary within emotionally charged and socially meaningful contexts. One of the most influential scenes occurs when Gloria delivers her speech criticizing unrealistic expectations imposed on women:

"It is literally impossible to be a woman."

During the final conflict before the liberation of Barbieland, Gloria delivers a powerful speech to Barbie and the brainwashed Barbies at Mattel Headquarters in Los Angeles. In this crucial scene, Gloria explains the contradictory standards imposed on women in contemporary society, highlighting the unrealistic expectations they face. Her speech serves as a moment of awakening, encouraging the Barbies to recognize the social pressures that have constrained their identities and inspiring them to reclaim their autonomy, self-worth, and freedom from limiting gender stereotypes.

Although the statement appears pessimistic on the surface, it serves as a catalyst for empowerment. By naming and exposing systemic pressures, Gloria enables the other characters to regain their critical awareness and reclaim their identities. Words associated with *voice*, *choice*, and *self-worth* emerge from this moment of collective realization.

The film's dialogue also employs first-person expressions that reinforce agency. A notable example appears when Barbie finally accepts her evolving identity:

"I'm not pretty anymore." Ruth immediately responds: *"You were never pretty."*

In the denouement of the film, in a transitional dream-like space between Barbieland and the Real World, Barbie expresses concern that she no longer conforms to conventional beauty standards during a conversation with Ruth Handler. This pivotal moment reflects Barbie's growing self-awareness and identity transformation, as she begins to value authenticity and humanity over physical perfection and societal expectations.

Ruth's response challenges the reduction of female identity to physical appearance. The dialogue redirects attention from external beauty toward intrinsic human value. Consequently, the lexical focus shifts from appearance-based descriptors toward concepts of authenticity, self-acceptance, and personal worth.

Another significant empowerment-oriented dialogue occurs when Barbie helps Ken redefine his identity:

"You are not your girlfriend. You are not your house. You are not your mink. You are not your horse. You are Ken."

At the resolution in Barbieland, following the collapse of Kendom, Barbie speaks to Ken while he is experiencing an identity crisis after losing the patriarchal status he had constructed. In this emotionally significant conversation, Barbie encourages Ken to discover his self-worth beyond power, dominance, and his relationship with her.

This dialogue exemplifies empowerment through self-definition. The repeated structure *You are not...* functions linguistically as a process of rejecting externally imposed identities before affirming an authentic sense of self. The final statement, '*You are Ken*', emphasizes intrinsic identity rather than identity derived from social status, relationships, or power.

Another example of empowerment vocabulary appears when Barbie explicitly exercises personal choice:

"I choose me."

During Barbie's final transition from Barbieland to the Real World, Barbie, through her decision and actions, chooses to embrace human experience, uncertainty, and self-discovery rather than remain a perfect doll, reflecting her transformation into an autonomous individual capable of defining her own identity and future. The lexical item *choose* is a powerful marker of agency because it foregrounds the individual's capacity to make independent decisions. Contemporary discourse studies identify such expressions as indicators of agentive language that construct empowered subject positions. (Norton, 2019)

Furthermore, the film challenges traditional gender norms through vocabulary emphasizing capability, leadership, and equality. Historically, women have often been associated with lexical fields related to dependence and emotionality. However, *Barbie* disrupts these associations by presenting female characters as scientists, judges, presidents, diplomats, and leaders. The repeated use of occupational vocabulary associated with authority normalizes female competence and expands the semantic representation of femininity.

The film also employs contrastive vocabulary to highlight the tension between oppression and empowerment. Words such as *controlled*, *limited*, and *expected* are juxtaposed with *free*, *authentic*, and *independent*. This contrast becomes especially visible when Barbie moves from the rigid perfection of Barbieland toward the uncertainty of human life. Such semantic oppositions help learners understand how meaning is often constructed relationally rather than in isolation.

From the perspective of identity construction, the film illustrates how vocabulary can be used to negotiate and redefine the self. Barbie's evolving language reflects an ongoing process of identity formation in which words become tools for self-definition. This supports Norton's (Norton, 2019) argument that identity is continuously constructed through discourse and social interaction. For EFL learners, this insight is particularly valuable because it demonstrates that language is not merely a system of grammar and vocabulary but also a resource for expressing individuality and agency.

Additionally, the film's emphasis on inclusivity and diversity expands empowerment beyond individual identity to collective experience. Vocabulary associated with *belonging*, *community*, and *representation* suggests that empowerment is both personal and social. Through these lexical choices, the film promotes a vision of identity grounded in mutual recognition and social participation.

From a pedagogical standpoint, the integration of empowerment and identity vocabulary through film offers several advantages. First, it provides authentic and engaging language input. Second, it promotes deeper understanding by connecting vocabulary with emotional and social contexts. Third, it encourages critical thinking by prompting learners to analyze how language reflects and shapes identity formation. These benefits align with contemporary approaches to language teaching that emphasize communicative competence, intercultural awareness, and critical literacy.

In conclusion, the analysis of empowerment and identity vocabulary in *Barbie* (2023) demonstrates that vocabulary learning can be significantly enriched through engagement with gender

discourse. Through dialogues emphasizing *choice*, *freedom*, *self-worth*, and *agency*, the film provides learners with opportunities to explore how language functions as a tool for self-definition and social transformation. By encountering vocabulary in authentic and emotionally meaningful contexts, learners are better equipped to develop both lexical competence and critical awareness, making film-based learning an effective approach for vocabulary acquisition in EFL contexts.

4. CONCLUSION

Exploring Gender Issues Through Vocabulary Learning in Barbie (2023) demonstrates that vocabulary learning can be significantly enriched through engagement with meaningful social and cultural themes. The analysis reveals that the film presents a wide range of lexical items related to gender stereotypes, patriarchy, power, empowerment, and identity, allowing learners to explore vocabulary beyond its literal meaning. Words such as *beautiful*, *perfect*, *extraordinary*, *power*, *authority*, *freedom*, and *choice* function not only as linguistic units but also as carriers of ideological and cultural meanings.

The findings show that lexical meaning is highly context-dependent. Throughout the film, vocabulary associated with femininity, masculinity, and social roles undergoes semantic shifts that reflect the characters' evolving identities and the changing social structures within the narrative. Through these shifts, learners are exposed to authentic examples of how language constructs, reinforces, and challenges gender norms. The film also encourages critical language awareness by prompting viewers to examine the relationship between language, power, and identity.

From a pedagogical perspective, *Barbie* serves as an effective resource for vocabulary instruction because it provides rich audiovisual input, meaningful contexts, and emotionally engaging narratives. These features support vocabulary acquisition, retention, and deeper lexical understanding. Ultimately, integrating gender discourse into vocabulary learning promotes not only linguistic competence but also critical thinking, cultural awareness, and the ability to interpret language as a dynamic tool for expressing identity and negotiating social realities.

5. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors would like to express their sincere gratitude to the Department of English Language and Culture, Faculty of Language and Culture, Universitas Dharma Persada, Jakarta, for its academic support throughout this research. Special appreciation is extended to fellow lecturers and students whose discussions, insights, and encouragement contributed significantly to the completion of this article. The authors are also deeply grateful to the editorial team of the journal, particularly the Editor-in-Chief, for their valuable guidance, constructive feedback, and professional assistance during the review and publication process. Their support has greatly enhanced the quality of this article.

6. BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Agustiawan, R., 2024. Analisis Wacana Representasi Budaya dan Ideologi dalam Film Wadjda (2012) Pendekatan Semiotika Roland Barthes. *Al-Ma'any: Jurnal Bahasa dan Sastra Arab*, 28 December, III(2), pp. 1-7.
- Avdagić, K. & Džanić, M., 2023.. Power relations through the prism of critical discourse analysis and systemic functional grammar. *ExELL (Explorations in English Language and Linguistics)*, XI(1), pp. 63-98.
- Baker, P., 2018. Language, sexuality and corpus linguistics Concerns and future directions. *Journal of Language and Sexuality*, January, VII(2), pp. 263 - 279.
- Banet, S. & Weiser, 2018. *Empowered: Popular Feminism and Popular Misogyny*. s.l.:Duke University Press.

- Baxter, J., 2015. Who Wants to Be the Leader? The Linguistic Construction of Emerging Leadership in Differently Gendered Teams. *International Journal of Business Communication*, LII(4), pp. 427-451.
- Bigler, R. S. & Leaper, C., 2015. Gendered Language: Psychological Principles, Evolving Practices, and Inclusive Policies. *the Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 13 August.II(1).
- Boers, F., 2021. Glossing and vocabulary learning. *Language Teaching*, 02 september , LV(1), pp. 1 - 23.
- Creswell, J. W. & Poth, C. N., 2017. *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*. 4th ed. s.l.:SAGE Publications.
- Jr., J. A., 2025. Reflexive Human–AI Collaboration: Tracing the Evolving Epistemics of Qualitative Inquiry (2021–2025). *Research Square*, 19 November.pp. 1-27.
- Kaposi, D. & Richardson, J. E., 2017. Race, racism, discourse. In: *The Routledge Handbook of Language and Politics*. London: The Routledge, pp. 630-645.
- Legaspi, K. D. & Torres, 2026. The Naturalized Men and Over-represented Women: A Collocational Analysis of Gender Markers in Filipino Academic Discourse. *SUKISOK Journal of the Arts and Sciences* |, 28 February.pp. 33-47.
- Litosseliti, L., 2013. *GENDER AND LANGUAGE: Theory and practice*. New York: Routledge.
- Liu, G. L., Yue, Z. E. & Teng, M. F., 2025. Editorial: Celebrating Ten Years of Darvin and Norton's (2015) Model of Investment. *International Journal of TESOL Studies* , November, VII(4), pp. 1-7.
- Luke, A., 2018. *Critical Literacy, Schooling, and Social Justice: The Selected Works of Allan Luke*. New York: Deanta Global Publishing Services, Chennai, India.
- Nation, I. S. P., 2022. *Learning Vocabulary in Another Language*. 1st ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Norton, B., 2019. Identity and Language Learning: A 2019 Retrospective Account. *The Canadian Modern Language Review*, Volume LXXV, pp. 299 - 307.
- O'Halloran, K. L., Tan, S. & E, M. K., 2015. Multimodal analysis for critical thinking. 10 November , XLII(2), pp. 147-170.
- Peters, E. & Webb, S., 2018. INCIDENTAL VOCABULARY ACQUISITION THROUGH VIEWING L2 TELEVISION AND FACTORS THAT AFFECT LEARNING. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 3 September, XL(3), pp. 551 - 577.
- Peters, E. & Webb, S., 2018. INCIDENTAL VOCABULARY ACQUISITION THROUGH VIEWING L2 TELEVISION AND FACTORS THAT AFFECT LEARNING. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 30 January, XXXX(3), pp. 551 - 577.
- Sánchez, E. et al., 2023. The use of films in the teaching of English as a foreign language: a systematic literature review. *Asian-Pacific Journal of Second and Foreign Language Education*, 3 April, VIII(10), pp. 1-17.
- Schmitt, N. & Schmitt, D., 2020. *Vocabulary in Language Teaching*. 2nd ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Sriwimon, L. & Zilli, P. J., 2017. Applying Critical Discourse Analysis as a conceptual framework for investigating gender stereotypes in political media discourse. *Kasetsart Journal of Social Sciences*, May-August, XXXVIII (2), pp. 136-142.
- Topal, I. H., 2025. Research on Voscreen in English language education: A systematic literature review and content analysis. *The JALT CALL Journal*, 8 June.XXI(2).
- Veliza, L. & Farias, M., 2024. Exploring Discursive Positionings and Negotiations of Gender Diversity in English Language Teaching Through the Lens of Critical Pedagogy. *The educational Forum*, 30 April, LXXXVIII(3), p. 337–352.
- Webb, S. & Nation, P., 2017. *How Vocabulary is Learned*. s.l.:Oxford University Press.

- Xiao, H. & Li, L., 2021. A bibliometric analysis of critical discourse analysis and its implications. SAGE Journal, 12 June.XXXII(4).
- Yu, X. & Boers, F., 2023. Inferring the Meaning of Idioms: Does Accuracy Matter for Retention in Memory?. RELC Journal, 21 June, LV(3), pp. 721-734.