

Crossword Puzzle as a Medium of English Vocabulary Teaching at SMP Kesatrian 1 Semarang

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Abstract

English is a compulsory subject in Indonesia. English learners are required to be proficient in three language components: grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary. One of the language components that must be learned and mastered before the other two components is vocabulary. Considering the importance of vocabulary, teacher should be wise to identify and prepare appropriate methods or approaches to implement with their students; creativity is required. It is challenging for teachers to find the appropriate medium. Some researchers used a variety of vocabulary-teaching media and techniques to investigate it. Teaching using games is one of those. I use Crossword Puzzles as the medium for this study. The participant is a seventh-grade student in a class at SMP Kesatrian 1 Semarang, which has 31 students. I conducted a classroom observation and had an interview section to collect the data. This is a descriptive qualitative study that aims to describe the implementation of crossword puzzles in teaching and to explain the perceptions of English teachers and students regarding their use. Collaboration, contextual learning, and meaningful engagement were all part of the learning process. The implementation of the teaching aligns with the principles of Communicative Language Teaching, Vygotsky's constructivist theory, and Thornbury's approach to vocabulary teaching. The teacher and students had positive perceptions of teaching using this medium. In conclusion, crossword puzzles are effective in improving students' motivation, engagement, and vocabulary. It is enjoyable and pedagogically valuable in an EFL (English as a Foreign Language) classroom.

Keywords: *Crossword Puzzles; Vocabulary Teaching; Communicative Language Teaching; Constructivism*

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INTRODUCTION

English, as the first foreign language taught in formal schools from secondary level onward, is a compulsory subject in Indonesia. The general purpose of teaching English is to help students become more proficient in both written and spoken communication. Students are expected to be proficient in the four core language skills: listening, reading, writing, and speaking, to accomplish this purpose. Along with these skills, students or learners must also acquire three language components: grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary. Among these components, vocabulary plays a crucial role since it serves as the basis for language comprehension and communication.

Wilkins in Thornbury (2002) asserted that “without grammar, very little can be conveyed, but without vocabulary, nothing can be conveyed.” This claim highlights the importance of vocabulary in conveying meaning. Communication can still occur if the speaker has a sufficient vocabulary, even when grammatical structures are imperfect. In the context of English language learning, limited vocabulary is a common challenge faced by students. Limited vocabulary causes students' difficulty in expressing their thoughts, understanding texts, and engaging in communication activities. Vocabulary can be compared to bricks of a construction; a solid structure cannot be built without enough bricks. Likewise, students cannot develop their language skills without enough words. For this reason, vocabulary mastery is considered a crucial requirement for successful language learning.

Despite its importance, teaching English vocabulary to junior high school students can be challenging. Traditional teaching techniques like drilling and rote repetition are still frequently used in many classrooms. These approaches are not enough to engage students in the learning process, even though they can temporarily help them remember vocabulary. Students may feel unmotivated and bored with vocabulary learning, which can ultimately affect their learning outcomes. Teachers have a crucial role in creating an effective and engaging learning environment. Therefore, teachers are required to select appropriate teaching materials, prepare well-organized lessons, and employ effective teaching strategies to meet students' learning objectives. Creative medium selection is crucial. Students are more likely to remember and apply new vocabulary when it is taught in an engaging, interactive way.

Using educational games is one way to make vocabulary learning more interesting. It is considered an effective learning medium because it fosters a fun, motivating learning environment. A game is a fun, challenging, and engaging activity for learners. In language learning, games can encourage students to

interact with their friends while practicing the target language. Additionally, according to Thornbury (2002), vocabulary games can help students recall words more easily because a fun learning experience makes it more memorable.

A crossword puzzle is one of the many educational games used in language teaching and is considered an effective tool for vocabulary instruction. It is a word game consisting of a grid of squares that must be filled with words, either vertically or horizontally, based on the clues. This activity requires students to recall words, comprehend meanings, and use their critical thinking. Additionally, crossword puzzles can be used with students at different learning levels and across various learning contexts.

Several learning theories support the use of crossword puzzles in language teaching and learning. According to Richards (2006) the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) principle, learning activities should encourage students to use language interactively and meaningfully. This game allows students to learn actively by solving problems and discussing answers with their friends. Furthermore, the use of crossword puzzles aligns with Vygotski (1978) Constructivism, which emphasizes that learners construct knowledge through interaction and meaningful learning experiences. Students can actively develop their vocabulary while participating in collaborative learning through crossword puzzle activities.

Some previous studies have investigated the use of crossword puzzles to teach vocabulary. Nugroho & Suprpto (2017) (Zede, 2020), (Anwar & Efransyah, 2018) Wijaksono S & Siddik (2022), and Prayoga (2022) reported positive outcomes regarding the implementation of crossword puzzles in teaching vocabulary. According to their studies, crossword puzzles can increase students' motivation to learn, enhance their vocabulary mastery, and create a more enjoyable classroom environment. In addition, it motivates students to engage in learning activities actively. However, most previous studies focused mainly on the improvement and effectiveness of students' vocabulary acquisition after the implementation of crossword puzzles. The learning process and the perceptions of students and teachers are not sufficiently explored. It is important to understand these aspects because the success of a teaching strategy depends not only on learning outcomes but also on how the strategy is applied and experienced by learners.

Therefore, this study aims to investigate how crossword puzzles can be used to teach English vocabulary and to examine the perceptions of teachers and students towards this activity. This study was conducted at SMP Kesatrian 1 Semarang, where vocabulary learning included crossword puzzles. This study is expected to provide deeper insights into how crossword puzzles can enhance vocabulary learning in English classrooms by focusing on the teaching process and the participants' perceptions. Additionally, the results of this study may contribute to the development of more interesting and effective vocabulary teaching methods, particularly in junior high school contexts.

METHODS

This section describes the research approach used, the respondents involved in the study (if any), which should be kept confidential, the instruments, the procedures for data collection, and the methods for data analysis. The instrument's blueprint may be provided if necessary. Commonly used statistical formulas should not be put in this section.

This section can also be divided into several subheadings, as shown below. However, to write it in paragraphs (without subheadings) is preferred. This section should not exceed 10% (500-700 words for qualitative research) or 15% (500-1,000 words for quantitative research) of the manuscript.

This descriptive qualitative study investigated how crossword puzzles can be used to teach English vocabulary and to explain the perceptions of the English teacher and students toward this teaching medium. The qualitative approach was considered appropriate since the aim of this study is to understand the learning process and perceptions in the natural classroom setting. In the qualitative research, researchers focus on describing and interpreting phenomena that occur throughout the learning process rather than measuring numerically. Therefore, this approach enabled the researcher to understand how crossword puzzles are used in teaching and learning activities.

The participants of the study were an English teacher and the seventh-grade students of SMP Kesatrian 1 Semarang. The teacher was responsible for teaching English vocabulary and implementing crossword puzzles during the learning class. Meanwhile, the students engaged in class activities and shared their perceptions of the use of crossword puzzles.

The data were collected through classroom observation and interviews. A classroom observation was conducted to obtain detailed information on the use of the game in the learning process. I observed the learning activities, the teacher's instructional strategies, and the students' engagement during the lesson. Important events and interactions that occurred during the activity were noted. I could explain how

crossword puzzles are used in teaching through this observation. Following the classroom observation sessions, the interviews were conducted. The purpose is to understand better the perceptions of the teacher and students regarding crossword puzzles for teaching vocabulary. This study used semi-structured interviews, which allowed the researcher to prepare a set of guiding questions while still providing flexibility for participants to express their thoughts and experiences. The interview with the teacher covered teaching strategies, the advantages of using crossword puzzles, and the challenges encountered during the learning process. Meanwhile, the purpose of the students' interview was to investigate their motivation, learning experiences, and responses to the crossword puzzles.

An observation checklist, notes, and interview guidelines were the instruments used in this study. The observation checklist was used to help identify important aspects of the teaching and learning process, including the stages of the lesson, the use of crossword puzzles in instruction, and students' engagement during activities. In addition, interview guidelines were prepared to ensure that the interviews remained relevant to this research objective.

The collected data were analyzed using qualitative data analysis methods. The analysis involved some stages, including data reduction, data display, and conclusion. It started by organizing and choosing relevant data from the observation and interview transcripts. Second, the collected data were categorized and presented descriptively to describe the implementation of crossword puzzles and participants' perceptions. Finally, the conclusion was drawn based on the themes and patterns identified from the analyzed data. Through this process, I analyzed the findings and described how crossword puzzles were used as a medium for teaching English vocabulary.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

This section presents the findings of a study conducted at SMP Kesatrian 1 in Semarang on the implementation of crossword puzzles for teaching English vocabulary. Classroom observations and interviews with the English teacher and some students were used to collect the data. The findings address three aspects of the study: 1) the implementation of crossword puzzles in English vocabulary teaching, 2) the teacher's perceptions on the use of crossword puzzles, and 3) students' perceptions after experiencing vocabulary learning through crossword puzzles. The discussion explains the result by relating it to the theories of Thornburry (2002), Communicative Language Teaching Richards, 2006), the Constructivist theory of Vygotsky (1978), as well as previous studies in the field.

Implementation of Crossword Puzzles in Vocabulary Teaching

The classroom observation showed that the activity was implemented in stages. The teacher prepared the lesson systematically, starting with the introduction of the topic and continuing with interactive teaching activities using this game.

The teacher introduced the topic and explained the learning objectives at the beginning of the class. To activate students' knowledge of the subject, the teacher also asked several questions. This stage helped students connect their prior knowledge to the new words to be introduced during the class. Following the introduction, the teacher went over several vocabulary words related to the topic. The teacher gave the students examples of how to use the words, explained their definitions, and helped them pronounce them correctly. Students were encouraged to repeat and write the words in their notebooks. Before beginning the crossword puzzle activity, this step ensures that students have a basic understanding of the vocabulary.

The teacher gave out crossword puzzle worksheets once the students were familiar with the vocabulary. The worksheets consisted of a grid with empty boxes that needed to be filled with vocabulary words based on the provided clues. The purpose of the clues was to encourage students to remember the vocabulary they had previously learned in the lesson.

The crossword puzzles were given to the students to complete in groups. Students were able to share their knowledge with peers and discuss potential answers in groups. As students actively shared ideas and worked together to solve the puzzles, the classroom atmosphere became more interactive. The teacher monitored the class to assess students' progress and help as needed. When students faced difficulties, the teacher gave them clues or explanations to help them figure out the right solutions.

Table 1. Stages of the Implementation of Crossword Puzzles in Vocabulary Teaching

No	Stages	The Teacher Activities	The Students Activities
1	Introduction	Introduced the subject and the purpose of the lesson.	Listen to the teacher and answer the teacher's questions.

2	Presentation of Vocabulary	Explained pronunciation and meaning of the vocabularies.	Repeated and noted given vocabularies.
3	Puzzle Activity	Distributed worksheets of crossword puzzles.	Worked to solve puzzles individually and collaboratively.
4	Monitoring	Guided students and provided clues.	Figure out the answers himself and with peers.
5	Review	Discussed the answers.	Checked and corrected responses.

According to the results, the students were actively participating in the crossword puzzle activity. They tried to remember words that matched the puzzle's clues while talking about vocabulary hints with their group. The students asked the teacher when they had questions about specific vocabulary.

A more dynamic classroom emerged from the collaborative learning process during the crossword puzzle activity. As they worked through the puzzles, students showed enthusiasm and motivation, and the activity encouraged them to engage in learning.

Furthermore, the teacher emphasized the flexibility of crossword puzzles as a teaching medium. The teacher claimed that this game can be adapted to various learning contexts and students' skill levels. During the interview, the teacher said, *"The crossword puzzle is adaptable. It can be used individually, in groups, or in pairs. I usually modify it according to the learning objectives and the students' proficiency."* The teacher was able to implement differentiated learning techniques because of this flexibility. The teacher created puzzles with varying degrees of complexity to ensure that students of all skill levels could engage in the exercise without feeling overwhelmed.

The Teacher's Perception of Using Crossword Puzzles

The results of the teacher interview indicated several positive perceptions regarding the use of crossword puzzles in vocabulary instruction. According to the teacher, crossword puzzles increased students' motivation and participation during the lesson. This activity offered a more engaging learning experience than conventional vocabulary-teaching techniques such as memorization or translation exercises. The teacher clarified: *"The students look more excited when I implement crossword puzzles. They were active in discussing the answers to the worksheets with their friends."*

Furthermore, the teacher mentioned that crossword puzzles help students to recall vocabulary easily. Students were encouraged to consider the meaning and spelling of the words simultaneously, since the puzzles required them to connect clues to vocabulary.

The teacher also noted that crossword puzzles promoted collaborative learning. The students collaborated to solve the puzzles and helped each other when they got into difficulties. The teacher further elaborated: *"When students work in groups, they can support each other. Sometimes a student remembers the word and provides others with an explanation."* This collaborative learning setting improved not only their vocabulary knowledge but also their language and communication abilities.

The Students' Perception of Using Crossword Puzzles

According to the result of the students' interview, most of them had positive perceptions of the crossword puzzle activity. Compared to traditional classroom activity, some students said that solving crossword puzzles made learning vocabulary more exciting.

One student stated that learning vocabulary using crossword puzzles is fun since it feels like playing a game. Meanwhile, another thought is that this activity helped them recall vocabulary more easily. In addition, it is mentioned that working in groups made the activity more engaging because they could share ideas and support one another. *"When I had difficulty in doing the puzzles, my friends helped me, so that we could work together to solve them."*

Table 2. The Students' Perception of Using Crossword Puzzles

No	Aspect	Students' Responses
1	Vocabulary Learning	Students recalled words more easily.
2	Interest	Students found the activity enjoyable.
3	Motivation	Students were more enthusiast
4	Collaboration	Students enjoyed work in group or group discussion.

Discussion

The results of this study show that crossword puzzles can help students learn English vocabulary in English classrooms. The concepts of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) are reflected in the puzzle activity's active participation. According to Richards (2006), CLT places a strong emphasis on meaningful

communication and interaction during the language-learning process. Students engaged with their friends in this study as they worked on crossword puzzles, discussed the given clues, and negotiated possible answers. These interactions created opportunities for meaningful language use in the classroom.

The findings also validated Vygotsky's (1978) constructivist theory. Constructivism places a strong emphasis on how social interaction and collaborative learning experiences construct knowledge. Students shared knowledge and helped each other to find the right words when solving the crossword puzzles in groups. Vygotsky's theory of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which holds that students can reach higher levels of comprehension through interaction with more knowledgeable peers, is reflected in this process. Therefore, group-based crossword puzzles provide opportunities for peer learning and collaborative knowledge construction.

The results of this study also align with Thornbury's (2002) theory of vocabulary learning. According to Thornbury, learning vocabulary effectively requires three important components: active engagement with words, meaningful use, and repeated exposure.

Students were required to apply the words in the puzzle grid, understand the clues, and recall vocabulary in completing this crossword puzzle activity. Active cognitive engagement with vocabulary items was necessary for this process. Additionally, students' lexical memory was strengthened by frequent vocabulary use across several meetings. Students came across the same vocabulary multiple times during the lessons, which can also strengthen their ability to remember words.

These findings align with previous studies on the application of crossword puzzles in vocabulary learning. According to Destiana et al. (2020), crossword puzzles enhanced students' vocabulary mastery and raised their enjoyment of learning activities. Similarly, Nasrullah et al. (2021) discovered that crossword puzzles improved students' engagement and participation in vocabulary learning. Other studies conducted by Bastomi et al. (2024) researchers Madaniyah et al. (2024) also found that crossword puzzles enhanced students' motivation and classroom interaction. The idea that game-based learning activities can create a more engaging learning environment is supported by these studies.

Furthermore, the results of this study show that crossword puzzles enhance vocabulary learning and contribute to a more engaging learning environment. During the puzzle activity, students were more willing to participate in discussions and share ideas with their friends. This implies that this game can function as both a motivational strategy and a learning tool in English language teaching.

Overall, the findings show that crossword puzzles can serve as an effective medium for vocabulary teaching in Junior High School classrooms. Students are encouraged to actively engage with vocabulary, collaborate with their friends, and participate in meaningful educational activities.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to investigate how crossword puzzles can be used to teach English vocabulary and to examine the perceptions of teachers and students toward their use in the classroom. The findings and discussion indicate that using crossword puzzles improved vocabulary learning in the observed classroom.

Crossword puzzles were implemented in several structured stages, including vocabulary introduction, guided practice, puzzle-solving exercises, and reflection. During these stages, students were able to participate in collaborative learning and actively engage with the vocabulary items. Students were encouraged to recall, comprehend, and apply vocabulary in a meaningful context. As a result, compared to conventional vocabulary teaching methods, the classroom atmosphere became more interactive and student-centered.

The findings also showed that using crossword puzzles for vocabulary learning was perceived positively by both the teacher and the students. The teacher considered crossword puzzles as an adaptable and effective teaching medium that could be adapted to various learning objectives and students' skill levels. Meanwhile, students said that solving crossword puzzles improved their motivation, made learning vocabulary more enjoyable, and made it easier for them to recall words. The collaborative activity further enhanced peer learning and classroom engagement.

From a theoretical perspective, the results of this study support the principles of Communicative Language Teaching, which place a strong emphasis on meaningful interaction and active participation in the learning process. The findings further support the Constructivist theory since students built their vocabulary knowledge through collaborative activities and social interaction. The results also align with Thornbury's theory that repeated exposure, meaningful use, and active engagement with words are necessary for effective vocabulary learning.

In terms of practical implications, this study implies that English teachers might use crossword puzzles as a medium to improve vocabulary learning, especially for Junior High School students. Teachers can create a more interactive and engaging learning environment that motivates students to actively participate in the lesson by using crossword puzzles. Furthermore, teachers are encouraged to design crossword puzzles that align with their students' learning objectives and skill levels.

For future research, it is recommended to investigate the implementation of crossword puzzles across various educational settings and through other research methodologies, such as experimental or mixed-methods studies, to examine their effectiveness more comprehensively. The use of digital crossword puzzles or other game-based learning resources to enhance vocabulary learning in a more varied learning environment may potentially be investigated in future research.

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