Improving Students' Vocabulary Through Crossword Puzzle at Seventh Grade of SMP Kristen Tounwawan

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to improve vocabulary mastery through crossword puzzles among grade VII students of SMP Kristen Tounwawan in the academic year 2024/2025. This action research study was conducted at grade VII of SMP Kristen Tounwawan. It consisted of two cycles with five meetings in each one. The data were qualitative from classroom observation during the teaching and learning, interviews with the teacher and the students, and taking photographs. The data were in the form of vignettes, interview transcripts, and pictures. The validity of the research was established based on the criteria validity process, including democratic validity, outcome validity, process validity, catalytic validity, and dialogue validity. The trustworthiness of the data was employed by applying triangulation and theoretical triangulation. The result of this study concluded that there were improvements in student's vocabulary mastery. From the result of classroom observation, the students are better at using vocabulary during the teaching and learning process. The student's involvement during the implementation. Additionally, the implementations of crossword puzzles and the complementary action were successful in helping the students understand new words and learn English better. To conclude, the student's vocabulary mastery was improved by implementing crossword puzzles.

Keywords: *Vocabulary improvement, crossword puzzle, Junior high school Teaching technique, English learning*

INTRODUCTION

In this era of globalization, English has become essential for effective communication. Recognizing its importance, Indonesia mandates English instruction in formal education, emphasizing the four core language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing, along with their micro-skills, such as vocabulary. As Richards and Renandya (2002) highlight, vocabulary forms the foundation of language proficiency, directly influencing students' oral and written communication abilities. However, students at SMP Kristen Tounwawan struggle with low vocabulary mastery, affecting their comprehension and performance in English. Conventional teaching methods, such as translating isolated words, fail to engage students or provide opportunities for practical application, leading to superficial learning and forgetfulness.

Observations revealed that students encounter challenges understanding textbook instructions and lack enthusiasm in classroom activities.

Strategies like silent extensive reading, vocabulary games, and crossword puzzles were explored to address these issues. Nunan (2003) emphasizes meaning-focused input for vocabulary acquisition, while Harmer (2007) advocates vocabulary games for enhancing engagement. Additionally, Soeparno (1980) and Dhand (2008) support crossword puzzles as tools for fostering motivation and retention. The study adapts these methods by incorporating contextual sentences, dictionary use, and interactive group activities, aligning with Brown's (2001) communicative approach.

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Definition of Vocabulary

Vocabulary serves as the cornerstone of language learning. Jackson (2000) emphasizes that terms like "vocabulary," "lexis," and "lexicon" are interchangeable, representing the entirety of words in a language. Similarly, Brown (2001) and Todd (1987) assert that words are fundamental to language and our understanding. Nunan (2003) extends this by stating that vocabulary includes not only individual words but also word combinations, word families, and meanings. Spratt, Pulverness, and Williams (2005) add that vocabulary items represent words or groups of words with specific meanings, while Kamil and Hiebert (2005) stress the importance of understanding these meanings within context. Vocabulary is context-dependent, as Jackson (2000) highlights that its usage varies based on geographical, social, and occupational factors. In Indonesia, vocabulary learning is pivotal as it underpins students' listening, speaking, reading, and writing abilities.

2.2. Teaching vocabulary

Teaching vocabulary is integral to language instruction beyond introducing new words (Harmer, 2002). Teachers must select techniques that engage students and address their needs, ensuring enjoyable and effective vocabulary learning. March (2002) underscores the challenge of selecting suitable vocabulary for students' levels, advocating for prioritizing high-frequency words. Harmer suggests that effective vocabulary teaching requires understanding a word's meaning, usage, formation, and grammar. This holistic approach ensures that students retain vocabulary in their long-term memory and apply it in various contexts.

2.3. Types of Vocabulary

Vocabulary is categorized in various ways. Morley (2000) classifies it into traditional word classes such as nouns, verbs, adjectives, and conjunctions, while Nation (2008) organizes it based on frequency: high-frequency, academic, and technical words. High-frequency words are essential due to their wide usage, academic words are vital for learners in educational contexts, and technical words are specific to particular fields of study. Johnson (2008) further divides vocabulary into four categories: listening (words we hear and understand), speaking (words used in conversation), reading (words encountered in texts), and writing vocabulary (words used in

written expression). These distinctions highlight the multifaceted nature of vocabulary and its role in language proficiency.

2.4. Crossword Puzzle as a Teaching Tool

Crossword puzzles are an effective tool for vocabulary learning. Dhand (2008) defines a crossword puzzle as a game involving grids filled with words or letters based on clues. Moursund (2007) describes it as a mentally challenging activity, while Case (1994) highlights its ability to engage learners non-stressfully. Crossword puzzles are particularly beneficial for vocabulary acquisition as they aid students in memorizing and expanding their vocabulary. The Case identifies various formats, such as anagrams and word grids, that make puzzles engaging and educational. Unlike traditional exercises, puzzles are less stressful and promote enjoyment, making them an excellent supplement to classroom activities.

2.5. Teaching Vocabulary Using Crossword Puzzles

Case (1994) suggests integrating crossword puzzles into language learning through various methods, such as individual tasks, group work, or homework. Puzzles can also be used in self-access centres, providing students with additional opportunities to practice vocabulary. This versatile tool complements traditional exercises, enjoyably reinforcing vocabulary. Teachers can enhance their vocabulary retention and contextual understanding by engaging students in solving puzzles.

2.6. Relevant Previous Studies

Vocabulary encompasses all words in a language that individuals or groups understand and use. Kirdalaksana defines vocabulary as including all information related to word definitions and applications. Observations at the research site revealed that students had minimal vocabulary skills, as noted by their English teacher, Mrs. Novel. Students struggled with basic vocabulary, such as spelling names in English. Recognizing this gap, the researcher implemented teaching strategies focused on vocabulary development to address these shortcomings and enhance students' language skills.

METHOD

This study employs classroom action research (CAR), a reflective and systematic approach where educators collaborate to improve teaching practices. The findings are implemented directly to enhance learning outcomes.

The research follows the CAR cycle:

1. Planning: Preparation includes creating lesson plans, materials, media, and observation sheets for teaching vocabulary using crossword puzzles.

2. Action: The crossword puzzle game is implemented to engage students in vocabulary learning.

3. Observation: Using an observation checklist, the researcher documents student behaviour and learning progress.

4. Reflection: The researcher and teacher evaluate the game's effectiveness in enhancing vocabulary and plan revisions if needed.

The study is conducted over one month with seventh-grade students of SMP Kristen Tounwawan. Participants include 44 seventh-grade students and the class's English teacher as a collaborator. The data collected through 1) Tests: Pre-tests and post-tests assess students' vocabulary improvement. 2) Questionnaires: Students provide feedback on the effectiveness of the learning process and the game. 3) Observation Checklists: Insights into classroom interactions and student engagement are recorded. All the data were analyzed through test results and using mean scores to determine vocabulary improvement. The second is Questionnaires. The data was analyzed using percentages (Hafsah, 2008). The third is Observation Checklists. The thematic qualitative analysis provides additional insights.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study indicate several key improvements following the implementation of the crossword puzzle method in vocabulary learning. The first is Vocabulary Improvement. The implementation of crossword puzzles resulted in a significant enhancement of students' vocabulary mastery. This improvement is reflected in the increased average scores on vocabulary tests, showing consistent progress from the first cycle to the final cycle. The second is Student Interest and Engagement. The use of crossword puzzles created a more engaging and interactive learning environment. Students demonstrated higher levels of interest and enthusiasm, making the learning process more enjoyable and motivating them to acquire new vocabulary with greater eagerness. The third is the Effectiveness of the Method. The crossword puzzle method proved to be an effective tool for enhancing students' vocabulary skills. It facilitated better retention and recall of vocabulary by presenting learning in an enjoyable and intellectually stimulating manner. The fourth is Observation and Reflection. Teacher observations highlighted noticeable changes in students' confidence levels. Initially hesitant students became more proactive in speaking and writing activities. Additionally, the frequency of vocabulary errors decreased progressively throughout the learning cycles, indicating a positive impact on students' language accuracy and confidence.

Result Of Questionnaire

The instrument consist of 14 questions and the questionnaire type is like a checklist, namely SS (Strongly agree), S (Agree), TS (Disagree). The results of the questionnaire showed that 20 students (79,98%) liked using crossword puzzles in teaching English. There were 14 students who agreed that crossword puzzles were more useful for learning and made it easier for students. Next, 3 students did not understand when learning using crossword puzzles. After that, 35 students vocabulary increased while 3 students were not interested and felt unable to express their opinions during learning using crossword puzzles. Apart from that, 9 students were

motivated and found it easier to answer questions when learning English using crossword puzzles and 3 students felt bored when learning English using crossword puzzle.

Result of Observation Checklist

The observations and assessments conducted throughout the study provided valuable insights into the effectiveness of using crossword puzzles (TTS) as a tool for vocabulary improvement. The findings are summarized as follows:

Based on the observation checklist, several key aspects were identified:

1. **Proactivity:**
   The teacher demonstrated a proactive approach by initiating lessons with brainstorming activities, encouraging students to actively participate in predicting the topic to be taught. This approach fostered an engaging and interactive learning environment.

2. **Activity:**
   Classroom management was effectively handled, with the teacher providing clear explanations about crossword puzzles (TTS), ensuring students had a solid understanding of the learning process. This facilitated a structured and conducive learning atmosphere.

3. **Post-Activity:**
   Constructive feedback was consistently provided, helping students recognize their strengths and areas for improvement in identifying vocabulary through TTS. This feedback played a crucial role in enhancing students' comprehension and confidence.

From these observations, it can be concluded that implementing crossword puzzle in vocabulary learning is an effective strategy. Students actively participated and showed an improved understanding of the material, while the teacher successfully guided the learning process.

Pre-Test Results

The pre-test results indicated that vocabulary mastery was a significant challenge for most students. Among the 44 participants, only 10 students achieved excellent marks, while 20 scored below expectations. These findings highlighted a considerable need for vocabulary enhancement.

Cycle One Results

In the first cycle, five meetings were conducted, introducing students to vocabulary related to the human body through crossword puzzles. Despite their initial unfamiliarity with the method, students gradually showed improved engagement. However, the post-test results revealed that only 10 students (40%) met the success criteria. Observations indicated that inconsistent attention and comprehension were obstacles to progress. As a result, adjustments were made to enhance the learning experience in the next cycle.

Cycle Two Results

The second cycle incorporated a revised approach that included interactive games and additional practice activities. The focus shifted to the Simple Present Tense, with puzzles reinforcing vocabulary learning. By the end of this cycle, students exhibited a significant increase in

enthusiasm and participation. The post-test results demonstrated a marked improvement, with the majority of students meeting the success criteria.

Stages of the Classroom Action Research Process

The research followed a systematic approach based on the Classroom Action Research (CAR) framework:

1. **Problem Identification:**

   The study identified key challenges such as students' low vocabulary mastery and lack of active participation in class.

2. **Planning:**
   Strategies were designed to address these issues, including the use of crossword puzzles, development of research instruments (observation sheets, tests, interviews), and planning the implementation timeline.

3. **Implementation:**
   The planned actions were executed in the classroom, with students engaging in vocabulary-based crossword puzzles related to lesson themes.

4. **Observation:**
   Data were collected through student engagement analysis, response evaluation, and test results, using both qualitative (observation notes) and quantitative (test scores) measures.

5. **Reflection:**
   The data were analyzed to assess the effectiveness of the intervention. Necessary adjustments were made for subsequent cycles, including the integration of visual and audio aids to support vocabulary learning.

The results from the final post-test showed significant improvement, with the majority of students achieving the targeted learning outcomes, thereby validating the effectiveness of using crossword puzzles as a vocabulary enhancement tool.

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that using crossword puzzles can effectively enhance students' vocabulary mastery when integrated with engaging teaching techniques, because crosswords encourage students to think critically and be active in the learning process. The interactive nature of the puzzles encouraged student participation and fostered active learning. While the first cycle revealed challenges such as low attention and insufficient understanding, adjustments made in the second cycle addressed these issues, resulting in a marked improvement. Cycles 1 and 2 have the same procedure, namely planning, action, observation and reflection, but the two cycles have the main differences, namely: cycle 1: initial exploration, identifying constraints and weaknesses. Cycle 2: Improvements based on previous findings for more optimal results.

This study aligns with previous research emphasizing the value of game-based learning in vocabulary acquisition. Game-based learning creates an interactive, fun, and motivating learning

atmosphere for students. This is important to increase student engagement in the learning process. Researchers found that this game accelerates vocabulary acquisition because students are actively involved and receive direct feedback during the game process. The results suggest that crossword puzzles make learning enjoyable and provide practical opportunities for students to apply vocabulary in context.

1. Background of the Problem

Based on initial observations, seventh grade students at Tounwawan Christian Middle School showed low vocabulary skills, with an average vocabulary test score of only 50. Most students found it difficult to understand new words and tended to be passive in learning English. Therefore, the crossword puzzle method was applied to improve their vocabulary mastery.

2. Description of Research Data

This research was conducted through two cycles involving 44 seventh grade students. The following are the research data:

a. Vocabulary Test Score

The results showed a significant increase in the average student score from cycle 1 to cycle 2.

b. Student Activity (Observation Results)

Student activity was observed using an observation sheet, with the following results :

Table 1.1. Cycle Result Comparison

Cycle	Average Value	Presentation Of Completion
Cycle 1	40	40%
Cycle 2	80	80%

The implementation of the crossword puzzle method yielded significant improvements in students' vocabulary mastery, as evidenced by several key aspects observed throughout the study.

Firstly, there was a noticeable increase in vocabulary test scores over the course of the study. Students demonstrated gradual improvement, with their average scores rising from the pre-cycle to subsequent cycles. In the first cycle, the average score reached 60, while in the second cycle, it increased significantly to 80. This upward trend highlights the effectiveness of the crossword puzzle method in enhancing vocabulary retention and comprehension.

In addition to academic improvement, the method positively impacted student activeness and participation. Observational data indicated that more than 79% of students actively engaged in group discussions while completing the crossword puzzles. This high level of participation suggests that the method fosters a collaborative and interactive learning environment, encouraging students to be more involved in the learning process.

Furthermore, the study revealed a positive response to the crossword puzzle method. Based on questionnaire results, the majority of students expressed enthusiasm and enjoyment in using crossword puzzles as a learning tool. They found the method enjoyable and believed it effectively aided their ability to remember new vocabulary more easily, enhancing their overall learning experience.

Despite these positive outcomes, some obstacles were encountered during implementation. Certain students faced challenges in understanding less commonly used words. However, this issue was effectively addressed by providing relevant contextual clues and synonyms, which helped students overcome difficulties and expand their vocabulary knowledge.

In conclusion, the findings suggest that the crossword puzzle method is an effective tool for improving students' vocabulary. The observed improvements in test scores, increased student engagement, and positive feedback indicate that the method not only enhances learning outcomes but also creates a fun and interactive classroom atmosphere. As a result, students are more motivated and enthusiastic about learning new vocabulary.

CONCLUSION

The conducted lessons gave more opportunities to the students to practice the vocabulary they learn. The activities included pronouncing the words and clues in the crossword puzzles, unplanned pronunciation practice, and making sentence activity. Therefore, the students were interested and enjoyed the teaching and learning process. In general, the implementation of crossword puzzles gave positive impact to the teaching and learning English in VII SMP Kristen Tounwawan.

In conclusion, using crossword puzzle helped the students improve their vocabulary mastery. It helped them not only to meet new words but it also maintained the words they already know. They could easier memorize the words they learn because the activities enabled them to meet the words more than one time. Moreover, it also because the use of crossword puzzles is considered interesting and challenging, so that they could learn without felt that they were being forced. Therefore, the teaching and learning processes become more enjoyable and valuable.

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