

An Exploration of Students' Perceptions Toward Crossword Puzzle Game-Based Learning in Enhancing Motivation to Learn English Vocabulary

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ABSTRACT

Vocabulary mastery is a crucial component in English as a Foreign Language learning, as it directly influences students' ability to listen, speak, read, and write effectively. However, many junior high school students demonstrate low motivation when learning vocabulary through conventional, lecture-based methods. This study aimed to explore students' perceptions of using crossword puzzles as a medium for learning English vocabulary and its impact on their learning motivation. A descriptive qualitative design was employed, involving seventh-grade students from MTsN 3 Aceh Barat Daya. One class of 30 students was purposively selected as the sample. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and documentation, then analyzed using Miles and Huberman's (1994) interactive model. The findings reveal that crossword puzzles significantly increased students' motivation, engagement, and vocabulary retention. Students reported enjoying the challenge and collaborating actively with peers, while observations showed high levels of participation and persistence in completing the tasks. The study concludes that crossword puzzles provide a simple, flexible, and effective strategy for fostering emotional, cognitive, and social engagement in vocabulary learning, and they can be adapted for other foreign language contexts to address low learning motivation.

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1. Introduction

Vocabulary is a fundamental element in learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Adequate vocabulary mastery is the main basis for improving language skills, both in listening, speaking, reading, and writing (Nation, 2001). Without sufficient vocabulary mastery, students will have difficulty understanding the subject matter, expressing ideas, and building effective communication in English. Therefore, vocabulary learning plays a

strategic role in determining the success of the overall language learning process. However, the reality in the field shows that students' motivation in learning English vocabulary is still relatively low. Many students find it difficult and boring when they have to memorize a list of words or follow vocabulary learning that is delivered conventionally. The dominant method is lecture, monotonous, less interactive, and does not provide space for students to actively participate in the learning process (Schmitt, 2000). This leads to a lack of students' emotional and cognitive engagement with the material, which ultimately results in low learning outcomes.

The low motivation of students in learning vocabulary is a challenge for teachers in designing more interesting and meaningful learning strategies. In this context, learning motivation has an important role because it is an internal driver that affects students' attention, perseverance, and involvement in the learning process. Low motivation often makes students passive, less enthusiastic, and even tends to avoid vocabulary learning activities. To overcome these problems, of course, an innovative, fun, and appropriate learning approach is needed in accordance with the characteristics of today's generation of learners.

Along with the rapid development of technology and updates in pedagogical approaches, the world of education is required to be more adaptive in designing learning strategies that are relevant to the characteristics of 21st-century students. One of the approaches that is now widely developed is game-based learning, which integrates elements of games in the teaching and learning process to create a more interactive, interesting, and meaningful learning experience (Prensky, 2001). In the context of learning foreign languages, especially English, the Game-Based Learning approach has been proven to have a significant positive impact on increasing learning motivation, strengthening memory, and developing students' critical thinking skills. Zarzycka-Piskorz (2016) in her research revealed that the integration of game elements in the learning process is not only able to attract students' attention, but also creates a more conducive and fun learning atmosphere. The research shows that educational games are able to stimulate students' emotional engagement, which plays an important role in building deep and meaningful learning experiences.

Game-based learning offers students the opportunity to engage in hands-on experiences and exploration, enhancing information retention and the ability to apply vocabulary in real-life contexts. Beyond serving as a form of entertainment, educational games present subject matter through enjoyable challenges that encourage active participation and contextual understanding. In this approach, teachers act as facilitators who design games aligned with learning objectives and students' characteristics (Gee, 2003). One popular tool for teaching English vocabulary is the crossword puzzle. Crossword puzzles integrate linguistic skills, problem-solving, and contextual word recognition. They not only help students memorize word meanings but also understand their use in specific contexts. Research by Baleghizadeh and Ashoori (2010) shows that using crossword puzzles in vocabulary learning increases student engagement, strengthens long-term memory, and fosters a more dynamic and collaborative classroom environment. This supports Kuo's (2009) findings that crossword puzzles help students form semantic connections between words, a key process for

internalizing vocabulary and improving lexical competence. More than a recreational activity, crossword puzzles serve as a cognitive strategy that requires high-level thinking, such as analyzing clues, arranging letters, and reconstructing meaning across contexts. This practice indirectly enhances students' inferential skills—the ability to derive meaning from linguistic clues which is essential for understanding authentic English texts.

Furthermore, crossword puzzles can also be adjusted to the student's ability level and specific learning themes, making them flexible to be used at different levels of education. In the process, students not only learn individually, but can also work in small groups to solve puzzles, ultimately encouraging social interaction and collaborative learning. Students' ability to complete this game reflects their understanding of the meaning of words, the ability to read instructions, and communication skills when working with classmates (Yip & Kwan, 2006).

Several previous studies have shown that the use of crossword puzzles in vocabulary learning can help students understand the meaning of words, improve memory retention, and create a non-stressful learning atmosphere (Kuo, 2009; Zarzycka-Piskorz, 2016). This game is considered to be able to build a fun learning experience, increase active participation, and strengthen contextual understanding of vocabulary. Even so, the majority of studies that have been conducted are still quantitative and focus on measuring learning outcomes or academic achievement of students in general. There is still very limited research that specifically delves into students' subjective perceptions, especially in the context of how these games impact their internal motivations in learning English as a foreign language.

Motivation plays a central role in language learning success, as it drives students to be more active, diligent, and committed (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Understanding students' perceptions of learning tools like crossword puzzles is essential for creating strategies that are not only cognitively effective but also address emotional and psychological needs. Therefore, research on students' experiences with game-based learning, especially in junior high school English vocabulary classes, is important. In light of this context, the present study aims to explore students' perceptions of the use of crossword puzzles in learning English vocabulary and their impact on learning motivation. This study aims to answer and find out what are students' perceptions about the use of crossword puzzles in learning English vocabulary? And how does the use of crossword puzzles affect student' motivation in learning English?

2. Methodology

This study employs a descriptive qualitative design to explore students' perceptions of using crossword puzzles in English vocabulary learning and their impact on learning motivation. The focus is to gain an in-depth understanding of students' subjective experiences in an engaging and interactive learning environment. The study population includes all seventh-grade students at MTsN 3 Aceh Barat Daya, consisting of four parallel classes with approximately 25–30 students each. Class VII B, consisting of 30 students, was purposively selected as the sample based on the students' level of active participation and their availability during the research period. Purposive sampling was employed as it is considered

appropriate in qualitative research, which prioritizes the depth of information over the generalizability of the population. As stated by Creswell (2014), purposive sampling allows researchers to intentionally select individuals or groups who possess in-depth experience and knowledge related to the topic being studied. Therefore, the data obtained are richer, more meaningful, and contextually relevant to the exploratory goals of the study.

Moreover, the primary instrument in this qualitative study is the researcher, who acts as the planner, implementer, and data analyst (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Supporting instruments include semi-structured interview guidelines adapted from Dzulfikri (2016), consisting of 12 interview questions; observation sheets also adapted from Dzulfikri (2016), comprising 6 indicators/aspects to be observed; and documentation tools. These instruments were employed to explore students' perceptions, monitor classroom dynamics, and collect supporting evidence such as photographs, students' work, and teacher notes. Data collection was carried out through in-depth interviews with purposively selected students, classroom observations during the learning process using crossword puzzle media, and documentation. The interviews were audio-recorded to ensure transcription accuracy, while the observations captured student engagement and emerging patterns of interaction. Documentation was used to validate and enrich the data obtained from the interviews and observations.

Subsequently, the data were analyzed using the interactive model of analysis by Miles and Huberman (1994), which consists of three main stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. In the data reduction stage, the researcher selected, simplified, and organized the data from interviews, observations, and documentation in accordance with the focus of the study. The reduced data were then presented in the form of narrative descriptions and descriptive tables to facilitate the identification of patterns, relationships, and emerging themes. The final stage, drawing and verifying conclusions, involved interpreting the meaning of the data within the context of the field findings.

To ensure credibility and validity, this study applied source triangulation (interviews, observations, documentation), member checking (validation of findings by participants), and peer debriefing (discussion of results with colleagues and academic supervisors).

3. Results and Discussion

The results of the research obtained through in-depth interviews and classroom observations showed that the use of crossword puzzles as a medium for learning English vocabulary is able to significantly increase students' motivation to learn. This increase can be seen in two main dimensions, namely affective aspects including enthusiasm, confidence, and interest in the material as well as cognitive aspects, such as the ability to remember vocabulary and use it in relevant contexts.

The key factor that drives this increase in motivation is the combination of the elements of play with the intellectual challenge inherent in crossword puzzles. This activity provides a sense of personal achievement when students succeed in finding answers, thus fostering intrinsic motivation as explained by Deci and Ryan (2000). This principle explains why

students are able to maintain focus, last longer on assignments, and show higher engagement than conventional learning that tends to be monotonous.

From a pedagogical perspective, crossword puzzles serve as scaffolding that helps students build semantic connections between words. This is in line with the findings of Kuo (2009) who stated that vocabulary game media encourages students to associate clues with previous knowledge, thereby strengthening long-term memory. Classroom observation also shows the natural occurrence of collaborative learning, where students discuss the meaning of words, spellings, and the context of their use. These interactions not only deepen individual understanding, but also develop social skills and teamwork.

The implementation of this Crossword Puzzle a significant transformation to classroom dynamics, for students VII B, MTsN Aceh Barat Daya shifting them from being predominantly passive to more interactive, collaborative, and conducive to the learning process. Students who previously tended to remain silent or act merely as listeners began to show greater confidence in expressing their opinions, asking questions, and providing feedback to their peers' answers. Class discussions became more vibrant as students were encouraged to solve problems together and exchange ideas, both in small groups and in whole-class forums. This change indicates a shift from a teacher-centered approach toward student-centered learning, where students take on the role of active participants and drivers of the learning process.

This phenomenon aligns with Zarzycka-Piskorz's (2016) assertion that integrating game elements into foreign language learning can reduce foreign language anxiety while simultaneously fostering stronger emotional engagement. A learning environment that is enjoyable, low-pressure, and intellectually challenging enables students to feel more confident in using the target language without fear of making mistakes. This condition is crucial in language learning, as lower anxiety levels combined with higher emotional involvement directly contribute to increased participation, deeper comprehension, and improved retention of the material. Thus, the crossword puzzle Game-Based not only provides cognitive benefits in terms of vocabulary mastery but also creates a psychological climate that supports the holistic development of students' communication skills.

Based on the measurement results using an observation sheet adapted from Dzulfikri (2016), student involvement during activities is in the very high category in all observed indicators, as shown in Table 1. These findings strengthen the argument that crossword puzzles are not just a recreational activity, but an effective learning strategy to simultaneously optimize students' emotional, cognitive, and social engagement.

Table 1. Average Score of Student Activity Observation

No	Indicators	Average Score (1–5)
1	Active participation in activities	4,8
2	Cooperation in groups	4,7
3	Ability to remember new vocabulary	4,5
4	Ability to use vocabulary in context	4,6

5	Positive response to activities	4,8
6	Motivation to complete the activity to completion	4,9

The practical implications of this finding are quite broad. First, this strategy can be adapted for learning vocabulary in other foreign languages, by adjusting the level of difficulty and context. Second, crossword puzzles can be used as a fun and stress-free formative evaluation, making students more motivated. Third, these media have the potential to be integrated with digital technologies, such as interactive apps, which can expand flexibility and strengthen learning engagement outside of the classroom.

Thus, the results of this study confirm that crossword puzzles are not just a game medium, but a simple, flexible, and effective learning strategy, which can be adopted by English teachers and other foreign language teachers to overcome low motivation to learn vocabulary among high school students. Its easy-to-adjust nature to various levels of abilities and learning themes makes this media relevant for use in both low- and high-proficiency classrooms.

Furthermore, the flexibility of crossword puzzles allows teachers to integrate them into various learning scenarios, ranging from new vocabulary introduction activities, material reinforcement, to non-stressful formative evaluations. By utilizing these media, teachers can create a more vibrant, participatory, and collaborative learning atmosphere, while encouraging students to be emotionally and cognitively actively involved in the learning process.

In addition, the application of crossword puzzles can be a bridge between traditional learning and modern technology, especially if adapted in digital form. This transformation has the potential to expand the reach and learning time of students outside the classroom, thereby supporting the principle of lifelong learning. With its potential, this strategy deserves to be considered as one of the best practices in language learning that is oriented towards increasing student motivation and learning outcomes in a sustainable manner.

4. Conclusion

This study set out to explore students' perceptions of the use of crossword puzzles in English vocabulary learning and to examine their impact on learning motivation. The findings indicate that crossword puzzles serve as an effective medium to foster both affective and cognitive engagement among junior high school students. The activity was perceived not only as enjoyable but also intellectually stimulating, as it combined elements of play and problem-solving, thereby encouraging active participation, collaborative learning, and meaningful vocabulary retention.

The research objectives were successfully achieved, as the data from interviews and classroom observations revealed that students responded positively to the integration of crossword puzzles, showing increased enthusiasm, focus, and willingness to complete learning tasks. This aligns with motivational theories that highlight the role of intrinsic

satisfaction and learner autonomy in sustaining engagement. Moreover, the flexibility of crossword puzzles allows them to be tailored to various proficiency levels and thematic content, making them adaptable for different language learning contexts.

In practical terms, these findings suggest that crossword puzzles can be adopted not only in English language classrooms but also in the teaching of other foreign languages. They can be utilized as an alternative to conventional vocabulary drills, as a tool for formative assessment, or even as a digital interactive resource to extend learning beyond the classroom. For future research, it would be valuable to investigate the long-term effects of crossword puzzle integration on vocabulary retention and to explore its application in digital learning environments for broader accessibility and engagement.

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