



ENHANCING VOCABULARY MASTERY AND ISLAMIC LITERACY THROUGH CROSSWORD PUZZLES IN THE ENGLISH CORNER

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ABSTRACT

This research investigates the role of the English Corner in improving vocabulary mastery and Islamic literacy among students through the use of crossword puzzles. Vocabulary is essential in language learning, serving as a link between speaking, listening, reading, and writing skills. However, many learners face challenges in acquiring and retaining new words. To address this issue, the study introduced crossword puzzles as an engaging and interactive learning method at SMK Negeri 1 Panyabungan. Utilizing a qualitative research design with a descriptive approach, data were collected from observations, interviews, and documentation involving 10 students from class XI LPB. The findings revealed that 80% of participants displayed increased enthusiasm and engagement in using newly learned vocabulary in both academic and everyday contexts. Additionally, the incorporation of Islamic terms in the puzzles allowed students to connect language learning with their religious knowledge, as evidenced by their ability to explain concepts such as sholat, masjid, and puasa. The study suggests that crossword puzzles are a valuable tool for promoting vocabulary acquisition, fostering critical thinking, and enhancing student engagement in the learning process. These findings contribute to the literature on innovative teaching strategies that integrate linguistic and cultural components in language education.



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INTRODUCTION

Vocabulary is a fundamental component of language proficiency and plays a crucial role in effective communication. Harmer (2007) states it serves as the foundation for the four essential language skills: speaking, listening, reading, and writing. Without a strong vocabulary, students may struggle to express their thoughts clearly and comprehend written or spoken language. Despite its importance, many learners find it challenging to acquire and retain new words. This difficulty often arises from the vast number of words that need to be learned, as well as the necessity to understand their meanings and appropriate contexts. Research has shown that vocabulary acquisition is not just about memorization; it requires meaningful engagement with words. Therefore, educators must find effective methods to enhance vocabulary learning. One promising approach is the use of interactive methods, which can make learning more engaging and enjoyable. Games, in particular, have been identified as effective tools for promoting vocabulary acquisition. This study focuses on the use of crossword puzzles as a method to improve vocabulary mastery and Islamic literacy among students.

To address the challenges of vocabulary acquisition, educators have introduced various interactive methods, with games being one of the most effective. Casañpitarich (2018) highlights that games create an engaging and motivating learning environment, which encourages students to participate actively. Among the different types of games, crossword puzzles stand out as particularly effective tools for learning. They combine fun with the active recall of vocabulary, making the learning process enjoyable. According to Zhang & Li (2020) vocabulary learning is significantly enhanced when learners are exposed to a variety of contextual applications and interactive elements, such as puzzles and digital games. When students solve crossword puzzles, they not only remember words but also

apply them in context. This active engagement helps reinforce their understanding of vocabulary. Furthermore, game-based learning promotes critical thinking, as students must analyze clues and think creatively to find answers. It also encourages problem-solving skills, as learners navigate challenges presented by the puzzles. Additionally, working on crossword puzzles often involves collaboration, allowing students to discuss and share ideas with their peers. Overall, using games like crossword puzzles in the classroom can significantly enhance vocabulary learning and make it a more enjoyable experience for students.

Interactive learning methods, such as games, provide a motivating and engaging experience for students. They encourage active participation, which is essential for effective learning. One such game is the crossword puzzle, which challenges students to recall and apply vocabulary in a fun and interactive way. Research indicates that game-based learning promotes critical thinking and collaboration among students Krishnan et al. (2023). By working together to solve puzzles, students can share ideas and support each other, creating a positive learning environment. Additionally, Nation (2020) emphasizes that vocabulary learning should involve meaningful exposure and repeated use in various contexts. Crossword puzzles align with this principle by requiring students to engage actively with words. This interactive approach not only reinforces vocabulary but also fosters deeper learning and retention. Overall, integrating games like crossword puzzles into the curriculum can enhance students' language acquisition experiences.

Game-based learning, as supported by Nation (2020), Krishnan et al. (2023), and Zhang & Li (2020), not only improves retention but also fosters motivation through contextual engagement. These scholars agree that learning becomes more effective when students are actively involved in the process. Games provide a relaxed and enjoyable environment that reduces anxiety and increases willingness to participate. When vocabulary is presented through games, learners encounter words repeatedly in meaningful contexts, which strengthens memory. Moreover, the challenge and reward system within games keeps students interested and attentive. Motivation is a key factor in successful language learning, and game-based tasks can increase intrinsic motivation by making learning fun and purposeful. Contextual engagement also allows students to relate new vocabulary to real-life experiences, making the words more relevant and easier to recall. This method supports both cognitive development and social interaction among learners. Students are encouraged to collaborate, share answers, and explain reasoning, which promotes deeper understanding. Overall, game-based learning creates a dynamic classroom environment that supports both vocabulary mastery and student motivation.

Incorporating Islamic literacy into vocabulary learning adds a meaningful dimension to the educational experience. Islamic literacy involves understanding religious terminology and concepts, allowing students to connect their faith with academic knowledge. This connection can make learning more relevant and engaging for students. Previous studies have shown that integrating Islamic elements in language learning enhances motivation and engagement Aqsal & Rahmi (2022). By embedding Islamic vocabulary in crossword puzzles, students can reinforce their linguistic skills while deepening their understanding of their religious beliefs. This dual focus on language and religious literacy enriches the learning experience and helps students appreciate the interdisciplinary value of language education. Furthermore, it encourages students to see the importance of language learning in the context of their cultural and religious identities.

With the rise of digital learning, technology-based vocabulary games have become increasingly popular in educational settings. These games offer additional benefits that traditional methods may not provide. According to Creswell and Poth (2018) digital platforms can significantly enhance student motivation and engagement. By incorporating technology into vocabulary instruction, educators can create more dynamic and interactive learning experiences. Tools such as digital crossword puzzles are particularly effective, as they integrate multimedia elements like images, sounds, and interactive hints. This multimedia approach caters to diverse learning styles and preferences, making vocabulary acquisition more accessible for all students. Furthermore, technology can facilitate immediate feedback, allowing learners to correct mistakes and reinforce their understanding in real-time. As students engage with these digital tools, they are more likely to take ownership of their learning. Overall, the integration of technology in vocabulary instruction represents a promising avenue for enhancing language learning outcomes.

This study specifically explores the implementation of crossword puzzles in the English Corner at SMK Negeri 1 Panyabungan. The primary aim is to develop students' vocabulary mastery and enhance their understanding of Islamic literacy. By focusing on this unique context, the research seeks to understand how interactive learning strategies can be effectively applied in a culturally relevant manner. The use of crossword puzzles not only engages students but also allows them to connect language learning with their religious knowledge. This connection is particularly important in fostering a deeper appreciation for both the language and the cultural concepts associated with it. The study will examine various aspects of student engagement, including participation levels, enthusiasm, and collaboration during the puzzle-solving activities. Additionally, learning outcomes will be assessed to determine the effectiveness of this approach in improving vocabulary retention and application. By investigating these factors, the research aims to contribute valuable insights to the field of language education. Ultimately, the findings will inform educators and policymakers about effective strategies for creating engaging and meaningful language learning experiences.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study used a qualitative descriptive approach to explore how crossword puzzle activities affect students' vocabulary mastery and Islamic literacy at SMK Negeri 1 Panyabungan's English Corner. This method was chosen because it helps capture the real classroom environment and understand students' views through detailed and rich data Creswell & Poth (2018). The participants included 10 students from class XI LPB, who were selected based on their regular participation in English Corner activities. Although the sample size was small, it was adequate for a deep qualitative exploration. This allowed for close observation and interaction with each student, providing valuable insights into their learning experiences. The focus was on understanding how these activities impacted their vocabulary and connection to Islamic concepts. By using a small group, the study aimed to gather detailed information that larger studies might overlook. This approach emphasizes the importance of individual student experiences in the learning process. Overall, the qualitative method was well-suited for this research.

Data were collected using three main methods: classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and documentation. Observations focused on how engaged students were, how they worked together, and how they solved problems during the crossword puzzle sessions. The researchers watched for signs of enthusiasm and collaboration among students as they tackled the puzzles. Interviews were conducted with both the students and their English teacher to gather personal thoughts and experiences related to the activities. These interviews provided insights into how students felt about learning vocabulary, especially Islamic terms, through games. Documentation included students' completed crossword puzzles, reflective notes, and other classroom materials that helped interpret the findings. This combination of methods allowed for a comprehensive understanding of the students' learning experiences. By using multiple data sources, the researchers aimed to create a fuller picture of how crossword puzzles impacted vocabulary learning.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the data, the study used triangulation, which means combining different data sources to confirm findings and reduce bias. Member checking was also employed, where interview summaries were shared with participants to verify accuracy and allow for any necessary clarifications. This step helped ensure that the students' voices were accurately represented in the findings. Additionally, peer debriefing with fellow researchers was conducted to maintain objectivity when interpreting the students' responses and classroom interactions. Thematic analysis was used to identify patterns in the data. Researchers manually coded interview transcripts and observation notes through an inductive process. They reviewed the raw data multiple times to find recurring ideas and behaviors. Initial codes were then grouped into broader categories, such as "student motivation", "understanding of Islamic vocabulary", "collaboration", and "confidence in speaking". These categories were refined into themes that reflected the overall learning experiences of the participants. Although the findings are not meant to be statistically generalizable, they offer meaningful insights into how culturally relevant, game-based learning strategies can enhance vocabulary development and student engagement in similar educational settings.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Vocabulary plays a crucial role in learning a foreign language, as it serves as the foundation for effective communication. According to Harmer (2007), vocabulary connects the four essential language skills: speaking, listening, reading, and writing. Without a sufficient vocabulary, students struggle to express their thoughts clearly and may find it challenging to understand others. This lack of vocabulary can lead to frustration and hinder their overall language learning experience. Moreover, many students face difficulties in retaining new words and often forget them shortly after learning. Therefore, it is essential for teachers to explore innovative and engaging methods to help students acquire and remember vocabulary more effectively.

One effective and enjoyable way to enhance vocabulary learning is through the use of games. Games create a dynamic and interactive learning environment that motivates students to participate actively. For instance, crossword puzzles are a popular type of game that requires students to think critically as they match words with their correct meanings. According to Dahlia (2023), crossword puzzles not only improve vocabulary but also encourage students to engage in problem-solving and critical thinking. This method transforms vocabulary learning into a fun activity, making it easier for students to stay focused and interested during lessons. By incorporating games like crossword puzzles into the curriculum, teachers can create a more stimulating and enjoyable learning experience for their students.

In addition to making vocabulary learning enjoyable, games also promote collaboration and communication among students. When working on crossword puzzles, students often collaborate in pairs or small groups, discussing clues and sharing ideas. This collaborative approach fosters a supportive learning environment where students feel comfortable expressing their thoughts and asking questions. Furthermore, as they work together to solve the puzzles, students reinforce their understanding of vocabulary in a meaningful context. This social interaction not only enhances their vocabulary skills but also builds their confidence in using the language. Overall, integrating games into vocabulary instruction can significantly improve students' language skills while making the learning process more engaging and effective.

1. Pre-Implementation Phase

Before starting the crossword puzzle activities, the teacher chose important Islamic vocabulary words that matched the students' level and learning goals. The crossword puzzles were carefully made to fit the students' abilities and to keep them interested in the activity. The teacher also gave a short explanation to the students about why learning vocabulary is important not just for language learning, but also for understanding cultural and religious topics. This preparation helped students get ready and feel more confident to take part in the activity.



Figure 1. Teacher's preparation of crossword puzzles and vocabulary explanation

As shown in figure 1, the teacher took important steps to prepare for the lessons. First, the teacher chose key vocabulary words that were related to Islamic knowledge. Words like sholat, zakat, masjid, and puasa were selected because they are important in Islam and can help students learn more about their religion. By including these words in the puzzles, the teacher aimed to make the learning experience more meaningful and relevant for the students. Next, the teacher designed the crossword

puzzles to match the students' language levels. This was done to ensure that the puzzles were not too difficult or confusing for the students. Based on the figure provided, the puzzles were tailored to be engaging yet appropriately challenging, allowing students to feel comfortable and confident while solving them. By creating puzzles that were just the right level of challenge, the teacher hoped to keep the students engaged and motivated.

Finally, the teacher explained to the students why learning vocabulary is important. The teacher talked about how knowing more words can help them in school and in their everyday lives. Based on the figure, the teacher emphasized that vocabulary learning is not just about memorizing words; it is about using them effectively in communication. By understanding the value of vocabulary, the students would be more likely to take an interest in learning new words and using them in their conversations.

2. Implementation Phase

During the implementation phase, crossword puzzles were integrated into English Corner sessions at SMK Negeri 1 Panyabungan. The teacher facilitated the activity by introducing the rules and learning goals, followed by student collaboration in solving puzzles. The classroom became a dynamic environment where students worked in pairs or small groups, promoting active engagement, peer learning, and spontaneous use of English vocabulary.



Figure 2. Students working together during the crossword puzzle activity

As shown in Figure 2, students were actively involved in the crossword puzzle activity, demonstrating teamwork and enthusiasm while enhancing their vocabulary skills in a fun and interactive way. The use of these puzzles not only made learning enjoyable but also helped students reinforce their understanding of the vocabulary in a meaningful context. Following this introduction, students collaborated in solving the puzzles, creating a dynamic classroom environment. They worked in pairs or small groups, which promoted active engagement and encouraged peer learning. This collaborative approach allowed students to spontaneously use English vocabulary as they discussed clues and shared ideas.

To understand how students responded, we observed 10 students from class 12 LPB. We looked at how active they were and how they reacted during the activity. The chart below shows their level of participation:

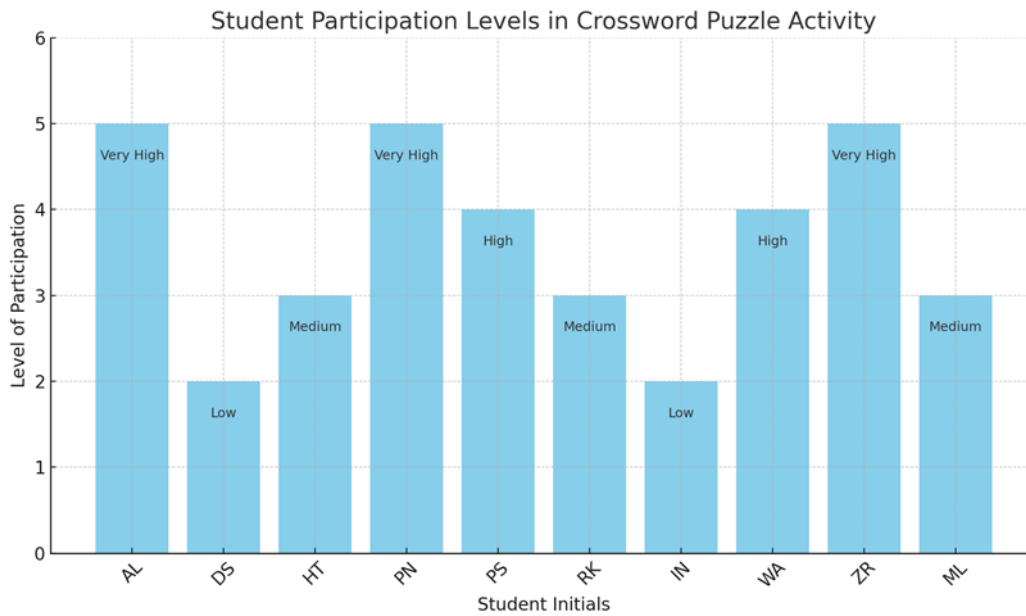


Figure 3. Bar chart showing student participation levels during English Corner crossword puzzle activity

The bar chart in Figure 3 shows how active each of the 10 students was during the crossword puzzle activity in the English Corner. Each student is represented by their initials, and their participation level is shown from “Low” to “Very High”. From the chart, we can see that some students were very active and showed strong interest, while others were quieter and needed more support. Three students AL, PN, and ZR had the highest level of participation. They were very enthusiastic and involved in the activity. On the other hand, DS and IN showed low participation. This means they were present and interested but were not very active. Most of the other students were in the medium to high category, showing that overall, the activity helped most students to take part and stay engaged.

Table 1. Students’ Participation and Reactions

No	Student Initials	Level of Participation	Classroom Reaction
1	AL	Very High	Very enthusiastic
2	DS	Low	Curious but quiet
3	HT	Medium	Willing to join discussion
4	PN	Very High	Highly motivated
5	PS	High	Participated actively
6	RK	Medium	Listened and responded
7	IN	Low	Needed encouragement
8	WA	High	Helped group members
9	ZR	Very High	Confident and talkative
10	ML	Medium	Focused but quiet

Table 1 shows that students had different levels of participation during the crossword puzzle activity. Some students, such as AL, PN, and ZR, showed very high participation. They were enthusiastic, confident, and helped their classmates stay active. Students like PS and WA also

participated well by staying focused and working together with their group. A few students, including HT, RK, and ML, were in the medium category. They joined the activity but were more quiet and less confident when speaking. Meanwhile, DS and IN had low participation and needed more support from the teacher to get involved. They were interested but did not speak much or take the lead. This shows that students have different learning styles and comfort levels in group activities. While most students enjoyed and engaged in the crossword puzzle task, some may need more time, encouragement, or simpler tasks to fully participate. Overall, the activity was successful in helping many students become more active and confident in using vocabulary.

Students expressed that they really enjoyed the crossword puzzle activity and were active throughout the English Corner sessions. Many said that connecting new English words with Islamic values made learning more meaningful. Important religious terms such as sholat, masjid, puasa, and haji were included in the puzzles. One student shared, "I'm not just learning words, I'm also learning what they mean in my religion." This quote shows how students could relate language learning to their faith. Another student mentioned, "It's easier to remember words when they are about something I already know from religion". This integration helped students feel more connected to the material. By combining vocabulary with Islamic values, the lesson became more relevant to their daily lives. It also showed them that English can be used to talk about things that matter personally and spiritually. Overall, students felt the activity helped them understand the meaning of new words in a deeper way.

Many students said that the crossword puzzles made learning vocabulary fun and interesting. They liked the idea of learning through games instead of just memorizing word lists. One student said, "I used to feel sleepy when learning new words, but this is fun and makes me think". Another student added, "I look forward to English Corner now because we play and learn at the same time". These comments show that students' motivation improved when the activity was more enjoyable. The puzzles also encouraged them to work together and help each other. As students solved clues in groups, they discussed word meanings and guessed the answers. This teamwork created a positive classroom environment. The interactive format reduced boredom and helped students stay focused. As a result, the classroom felt more alive, and students became more engaged in learning. This finding supports Krishnan et al. (2023), who say that learning is more effective when students are motivated and actively involved.

Besides enjoying the activity, students also reported that they learned many new words. More importantly, they started to use those words in speaking. One student stated, "Before, I didn't speak because I didn't know what to say. Now I know more words, so I try to use them". Another said, "Now I even talk in English when chatting with friends after class". These quotes show that the crossword puzzle not only helped students learn vocabulary but also made them more confident to use it in real life. The group setting made it easier for shy students to try speaking because they felt supported by their classmates. Mistakes were accepted as part of learning, which encouraged students to practice without fear. The teacher also noticed that more students joined class discussions after the activity. This improvement in speaking is important because it helps students become better communicators. The more they use the language, the stronger their skills become. In this way, the activity helped build both vocabulary and speaking confidence.

The crossword puzzle also helped create a friendly and supportive classroom atmosphere. Students often worked in pairs or small groups, which helped them build teamwork skills. One student said, "I liked how we could talk and share ideas to find the answers". Another shared, "I usually don't talk much, but during this game, I joined in because it was exciting". These group interactions made students feel more connected to one another. They listened, helped each other, and celebrated when they found the right answers. This made the classroom a fun and cooperative space. Even students who were usually quiet began to participate more actively. They said the activity helped them feel less nervous about speaking up. As a result, the teacher saw an improvement in class participation and peer relationships. The crossword puzzle was more than just a game it was a tool that brought students together and made learning enjoyable. This positive social experience added to their overall success in vocabulary learning.

Throughout the sessions, students developed important critical thinking skills as they worked on the crossword puzzles. They analyzed clues, recalled vocabulary, and figured out answers together. These activities helped stimulate their minds and were essential for deeper language learning. As students engaged with the puzzles, they learned to think critically about the words and their meanings. Additionally, the puzzles encouraged collaboration among students. They discussed possible answers, explained their reasoning, and supported each other during the activity. This teamwork created a positive and friendly learning environment. The social interaction among students made the learning process more enjoyable and effective. This approach aligns with constructivist learning principles, which emphasize the importance of peer interaction and active participation in learning Czerniawski (2007). Overall, the combination of critical thinking and collaboration greatly enhanced the students' learning experience.

The crossword puzzles also helped students improve their spelling skills. They needed to spell words accurately to complete the puzzles, which encouraged them to pay attention to how words are written. When students made mistakes, they discussed them with their peers, which helped reinforce correct spelling patterns. This process of correcting mistakes encouraged self-correction and made students more aware of their spelling. Moreover, the puzzles exposed students to words in context, which is important for understanding their meanings. By using clues, students learned to infer the meanings of words, an essential skill for reading comprehension. This ability to understand words in different contexts will help them apply their vocabulary in real-life situations. Overall, the focus on spelling and contextual understanding contributed to their overall language development. The combination of these skills is crucial for becoming confident and effective communicators.

The inclusion of Islamic vocabulary in the crossword puzzles made the activity more culturally relevant for the students. They engaged more meaningfully with the content because it resonated with their faith and everyday experiences. By learning words related to their religion, students felt a stronger connection to the material. This dual focus on language and religious literacy added depth to their learning experience. It helped students appreciate the importance of language education in understanding their culture and beliefs. The integration of Islamic vocabulary also encouraged students to see the value of learning in a broader context. They realized that language learning is not just about words but also about connecting with their identity. This approach enriched their educational experience and made learning more enjoyable. Overall, the combination of language and cultural relevance enhanced their motivation and engagement.

Despite the overall positive results, some students faced challenges with more advanced vocabulary. A few students struggled to understand certain words, which highlighted the need for additional support. Teachers recognized that not all students had the same level of vocabulary knowledge. Some students required extra help and clarification to fully participate in the activity. This indicates the importance of differentiated instruction to meet the diverse needs of learners. Providing pre-teaching of difficult terms and contextual explanations could further improve comprehension. By addressing these challenges, teachers can help all students succeed in their language learning. It is essential to create an inclusive environment where every student feels supported. Overall, recognizing and addressing these challenges will enhance the effectiveness of future lessons.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

1. Conclusion

This study demonstrated that the use of crossword puzzles in English Corner activities at SMK Negeri 1 Panyabungan effectively supported students' vocabulary development and integration of Islamic literacy. The activity not only enhanced language learning but also fostered critical thinking, collaboration, and increased student motivation. By connecting English vocabulary with Islamic values, the learning process became more meaningful and relevant to students' lives. The qualitative findings highlight that game-based learning can create a supportive environment that encourages student participation and confidence in language use. This research contributes to the growing body of literature on interactive and culturally responsive teaching strategies, especially within the context of Islamic-based education. It provides practical insights into how vocabulary learning can be made more engaging

through the use of educational games. Furthermore, it illustrates how integrating religious themes into language learning can enhance both academic and personal development. These findings are particularly relevant for educators seeking to adopt student-centered methods in multilingual and faith-based classrooms.

2. Suggestion

To improve the effectiveness of similar activities in future teaching practices, it is recommended that teachers provide differentiated support for students with varying levels of vocabulary proficiency. This may involve pre-teaching complex vocabulary or offering scaffolded clues to ensure equitable participation. Additionally, integrating a wider variety of game-based methods may address different learning styles and maintain student engagement over time. Teachers should also consider evaluating students' vocabulary progress regularly to better tailor instructional strategies. Future research may explore the long-term effects of using crossword puzzles and similar games on vocabulary retention, speaking fluency, and reading comprehension. Comparative studies involving different student populations and educational settings could offer broader insights into the generalizability of this approach. Investigating the role of digital crossword platforms or mobile-based applications could also extend the practical implementation of this method in modern classrooms. By continuing to explore and refine game-based learning approaches, educators can foster more inclusive, effective, and engaging language learning experiences.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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