

Investigating Junior High School Student in Learning Reading Through Word Search Puzzle Game : Case Study

Diki Ripaldi¹, Nia Pujiawati², Abdul Kodir Al-Baekani³

University of Singaperbangsa Karawang, Indonesia

¹ 1910631060162@student.unsika.ac.id, ² nia.pujiawati@fkip.unsika.ac.id,

³ akodir.albaekani@staff.unsika.ac.id

Abstract

Many students struggle to form simple sentences for everyday conversations. Vocabulary is the main foundation of language, and the richness of a person's understanding greatly determines their ability to capture meaning, understand context, and connect ideas in a text. Teachers must pay special attention to gain students' motivation to expand their vocabulary. Therefore, the research aimed to explore the implementation and investigate students in word-search puzzle games as a learning medium to assist students in reading classrooms. The researcher used qualitative research with a case study design. Five students of junior high school students were involved in this research. Research data was collected through interviews and observation. The data was analyzed by thematic analysis. The study found that teachers implementing a learning strategy following the theory of Safadi and Rababah encourage student engagement and improve reading skills by using the Word Search Puzzle Game as a learning medium. There are four stages to implementing this strategy. This strategy can encourage students to learn so that they can explore their reading skills. It can be concluded that integrating the Word Search Puzzle Game into reading learning can increase students' cognitive, affective, and behavioral engagement and prove that interactive and exciting learning media can help achieve learning.

Keywords: Interactive Learning Medium; Students' Engagement; Vocabulary Learning; Word-Search Puzzle Game

INTRODUCTION

Vocabulary is essential in oral and written language (Hakim, 2019). A deep understanding of skills makes it easier for students to improve their language skills, such as listening, speaking, reading, and writing in English as a second language. The breadth of understanding has a significant impact on the effectiveness of communication. In the digital era, mastering English is crucial for students because this language is used in various aspects of life. The goal of learning English in grade 7 in Indonesia, namely developing communicative competence in spoken and written language, is a challenge due to individual differences and obstacles to student achievement (2022). The complexity of understanding in English magnifies this challenge (Dröse & Prediger, 2021), with the richness of understanding supporting more effective communication (Zaytseva et al., 2021). Factors such as socio-cultural differences and educational programs also contribute to students' limited understanding. Unlike countries such as Singapore, the Philippines, and Malaysia, where English is actively used, Indonesia places English as a foreign language, which presents additional challenges for students to understand this language (Nishizawa et al., 2018). A similar situation has also occurred in Korea and Japan. This limitation affects students' ability to construct sentences orally and in writing because they often need to translate ideas from their mother tongue first (Linh & Ha, 2021). Students need help to use English effectively in everyday communication and reading activities.

Limited comprehension also helps students understand complex texts. Students often stop to look up the meaning of words, which disrupts the reading flow and reduces comprehension (Hiebert, 2020; Hsueh-Chao & Nation, 2000). When many words in a text are incomprehensible, students need help to grasp the main idea or analyze the text in depth.

Early research found that conventional teaching methods, such as book-based learning, were ineffective in increasing students' motivation to expand their knowledge, so interventions in the form of more interesting learning media were needed. This motivation is critical because with motivation, both from intrinsic and extrinsic factors, it is easier for students to achieve learning goals (Diseth et al., 2020; Liu et al., 2020). Research shows that media such as Word Search Puzzle games can help improve students' motivation and mastery of understanding. For example, research by Maylani et al. (2021) showed a significant difference in vocabulary mastery between the experimental and control groups, where word search puzzles were proven effective in improving students' vocabulary.

Kuserawati et al. (2024) also found that the application of Word Search Puzzle significantly increased students' average scores. This finding aligns with other studies showing that this approach effectively masters students' skills. This study contributes to language teaching methodology with a qualitative approach, which explores students' learning experiences more in-depth. With a combined quantitative and qualitative approach, this study provides a more comprehensive insight into the learning process while paving the way for a more holistic approach to language learning evaluation.

METHOD

This study uses a qualitative approach with a case study design based on Yin's theory (2018) to examine English vocabulary teaching using Word Search Puzzle media. The subjects were five seventh-grade students of MTs Miftahul Huda, Tegalwaru, and Karawang, who were voluntarily selected to increase the validity of the observation data. This study was conducted through three main stages: the initial stage, in problem identification and research planning; the research stage, where data were collected and analyzed using thematic analysis from Braun and Clarke (2022); and the final stage, in the form of reporting findings and publication. Data was collected through observation and interviews to capture students' cognitive and behavioral responses. The research instruments included an observation checklist from Winocur (1985) and Bradshaw & Kush (2020), as well as an interview guide that integrated theories from Jang & Protacio (2020) and Williams et al. (2023) to ensure reflexivity and reduce bias. The analysis results show students' responses to vocabulary teaching strategies using Word Search Puzzle, with in-depth understanding obtained through systematic codification and grouping of themes, which are then presented in the form of a report to answer the research questions comprehensively.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Based on observation and interview data, the results of this study indicate that teachers have implemented learning strategies based on the theory of Safadi and Rababah (2012), which consist of four stages: Building Prior Knowledge, Demonstration, Guided Practice, and Independent Practice. Each stage is designed to provide gradual support in students' mastery of the material, focusing on using the Word Search Puzzle game media as a reading learning tool.



Picture 1. Students' Interaction During Practice of Word Search Puzzle Game

In the first stage, Building Prior Knowledge, teachers are essential in introducing the topic and building students' knowledge base. This stage aims to increase students' motivation and interest in the studied material. A practical introduction helps students understand the learning context and prepares them mentally for the next stage.

The second stage, Demonstration, is when the teacher effectively shows how to use learning strategies and media, such as the Word Search Puzzle game. This process provides students with a clear understanding of how to use the media. Teachers are expected to be able to provide exciting and easy-to-understand instructions so that students can apply learning strategies correctly. This stage is the foundation for students to move on to the practice stage.

The third stage is Guided Practice, where students begin to practice with guidance from the teacher. This practice ensures that students can apply what they have learned with the guidance of teachers who actively monitor student progress and provide direction if needed. This stage helps students refine their understanding before moving on to independent practice.

The last stage, Independent Practice, allows students to practice independently without teacher assistance. At this stage, the teacher evaluates students' understanding and mastery of the material. After the independent practice is completed, the teacher provides constructive feedback to help students correct deficiencies and improve understanding. The reference images show that students actively participate, are involved in the practice process at the guided and independent stages, and show enthusiasm. However, some students seem less interested in participating in learning.

In addition to successfully implementing the teaching strategy based on the theory of Safadi & Rababah (2012), this study also found that students were very interested in the Independent Practice stage. In interviews, most students expressed their interest in this stage. This stage provides an exciting challenge and increases learning motivation because students are free to practice without direct guidance from the teacher.

S1: I like it when I can try it myself without being guided continuously. It feels more challenging and exciting.

S2: I feel more confident in the independent practice section because I can evaluate my understanding. If something is wrong, I can fix it after the teacher tells me.

S3: Learning and practicing directly and independent makes me feel more responsible for my learning. I can focus more and understand the material in my way.

S4: I like the practice stage without being accompanied by a teacher because I can practice alone, like playing games and learning.

S5: When I practice independently, I feel more accessible and can try many times until I succeed.

Student statements indicate that they enjoy the personal challenges offered by independent practice, which increases their confidence because they can evaluate their understanding before receiving feedback from the teacher. Independent practice also helps students feel more responsible for their learning by allowing them to practice according to their learning style and try until they succeed. Overall, independent practice allows students to be more actively involved, increases motivation, and gives them control over the learning process according to their needs.

In the meantime, each stage of learning with the game Word Search Puzzle produced various student responses from affective, behavioral, and cognitive aspects. In the early stages, students' knowledge-building showed high motivation, comfort, and intense emotional involvement in the learning process and active participation in class discussions. It showed a significant increase in learning motivation and participation. Cognitively, students showed a good understanding of the material when the teacher connected new material with their existing knowledge, supporting the effectiveness of the gradual teaching strategy (S1, S2, S3, S4, S5). Students considered this method fun and interactive, which made the reading-learning process more dynamic and reduced boredom. The demonstration stage strengthened students' self-confidence, increasing their understanding of how to apply reading strategies through practical examples shown by the teacher (S1, S2, S3, S4, S5).

S1: This method is enjoyable because it makes learning to read more interactive and not boring. This step really helped me understand the basic reading concept in a fun and easy-to-follow way.

S2: Using a Word-Search Puzzle makes me more interested in learning the concept of reading because it has an element of play. The Word-Search Puzzle makes the basic reading concept more clear. But sometimes, I also need time to understand the instructions.

S3: I feel happy because this method makes reading easier to understand. This step helps me recognize words and understand the basic reading concept. Because this step is evident and clear to understand

S4: using a Word-Search Puzzle can make me more focused when learning to read. After using this method, I feel more understanding of the reading concept. However, sometimes, I find it difficult to follow this strategy because the instructions are too fast.

S5: Sometimes, I need clarification. But learning becomes fun and exciting. It doesn't make me sleepy.

S5: Understand. The method is also easy, so I can easily understand the words, too, but at the beginning, I also had a little difficulty understanding the instructions.

In the structured practice stage, students participated in small groups, showing the ability to help each other and contribute actively. However, some students felt that their roles in the group were unbalanced, so some students became passive. Collaboration in this group effectively improved understanding and cognitive abilities, although there were obstacles in the form of a lack of active participation from some members (S1, S2, S3, S4, S5). The independent practice stage showed increased student confidence in completing tasks independently. Most students felt satisfied and showed better reading skills, but some needed additional guidance. This

independent practice effectively improved students' abilities, although more attention was needed for students still having difficulties (S1, S2, S3, S4, S5).

S1: Yes, I feel **more confident** after watching the demonstration. The demonstration **helped** me see how the reading strategy is applied practically in the game. Sometimes, small groups are ineffective because **some friends are not actively participating**. However, working together in groups helps me **understand the material better**. In the meantime, I feel **satisfied** and **happy** when completing the Word-Search Puzzle independently. I **work independent and complete the task well**, which has my reading skills.

S2: The demonstration makes me **feel more prepared** to apply the reading strategy. I can **better understand** how to use the Word-Search Puzzle **to find keywords in the reading**. Working in small groups is **fun** because I can **learn from my friends**. Group collaboration makes it **easier for me to discuss** and **solve** existing problems. Completing the puzzle independently makes me **feel more confident**. I feel **skilled enough to work without help**. I also feel **my reading skills have improved** because **I practice often**.

S3: I became **more confident** because the demonstration **provided clear examples**, and I became **more confident** in applying the reading strategy taught. The experience of working in groups helps me **understand how to solve puzzles better**. However, sometimes, **discussions** in groups **confuse** me. Sometimes, I feel **frustrated** when I **face difficulties** completing the puzzle alone. I feel **comfortable working independent**, but sometimes, I need a little **help for clarification**. However, this learning makes me **more focused** and **improves my reading skills**.

S4: I feel **more confident**, but I still **need more practice**. Working in small groups makes it **easier for me to discuss** and **solve problems together**. In addition, I can **find various ways to solve puzzles**. But, I **enjoy** the challenge of **completing the puzzle independent** and feel **more skilled**. I can **complete the task independent** because I already **understand** the concept well. The exercises and practices that are done provide progress in my reading skills.

S5: Enough. I still feel **less confident** and **need more initial practice**. I feel **happy** because I can **complete the puzzle alone without help**. However, the demonstration is very **helpful** and makes it **easier to practice directly**. Working in groups makes the learning process more **interactive** and **fun**. It provides **new perspectives** and helps me **understand the material** more deeply. However, sometimes, there are still **some other students who are not actively involved**.

Overall, the Word Search Puzzle method proved effective in improving students' understanding, focus, and engagement in learning to read and providing a fun and challenging learning experience. This method positively impacted students' affective, behavioral, and cognitive aspects. It helped improve students' confidence and understanding of reading concepts, although additional attention was needed to balance roles in the group and support for students who needed more guidance.

Discussion

The results of this study indicate that the application of learning strategies based on the theory of Safadi and Rababah (2012) is able to encourage students to explore students' reading learning practices by utilizing the Word Search Puzzle Game media. This theory includes four teaching stages: Building Prior Knowledge, Demonstration, Guided Practice, and Independent Practice, which aim to provide gradual support during the learning process. In the first stage, Building Prior Knowledge, students show increased motivation and interest in the material because the

topic is introduced contextually. The Demonstration stage provides clear instructions for using learning media so that students can understand and utilize the Word Search Puzzle Game in their learning.

Furthermore, Guided Practice allows students to apply knowledge with teacher guidance, ensuring the correct application of the material that has been learned. In the Independent Practice stage, students practice independently, indicating that this freedom encourages higher involvement in the learning process. Interview results confirmed that students felt more involved and motivated during this stage, which aligns with constructivist learning theory, emphasizing the importance of the independent application of knowledge (Chuang, 2021). In addition, using the Word Search Puzzle Game has proven effective in increasing student engagement because this media makes reading learning more exciting and interactive, following the statement of Puspitarini and Hanif (2019) that engaging and interactive learning media can increase student participation and motivation.

The implementation of this theory-based strategy, together with suitable learning media, has succeeded in exploring students' reading skills and motivating them to be more active in learning. At each stage, this strategy significantly contributes to student learning outcomes. This study's findings also show that using the Word Search Puzzle Game positively affects students' affective, behavioral, and cognitive aspects at each stage. In the early stages, students feel motivated and comfortable and actively discuss in class, indicating good emotional and intellectual engagement (Barkley & Major, 2020). At the Demonstration stage, students' active involvement can be seen from their participation in discussions and interactions with the media, following the motivation theory that active involvement increases intrinsic motivation (White et al., 2021). The Guided Practice stage shows successful collaboration, although some students need to participate equally in groups (Vygotsky, 1978). Finally, students felt increased confidence and satisfaction at the Independent Practice stage, although some still needed additional support for a more profound understanding (Green et al., 2022). Overall, this study confirms that interactive learning media such as Word Search Puzzle Game not only increase student engagement but also strengthen their comprehension and reading skills and build optimal engagement in the learning process (Maylani et al., 2021; Saputri, 2018; Scheb-Bunner et al., 2017).

CONCLUSION

This study shows that Safadi and Rababah's (2012) learning strategy with Word Search Puzzle media effectively increases students' engagement and reading ability. Each stage—Initial Knowledge Building, Demonstration, Guided Practice, and Independent Practice—contributes significantly to learning outcomes. The initial stage interestingly introduces the material, while Demonstration provides media guidance, Guided Practice encourages collaboration, and Independent Practice strengthens independence. This strategy supports constructivist theory, increases students' cognitive, affective, and behavioral engagement, and proves that interactive learning media supports learning achievement.

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