



Exploring Teachers’ and Students’ Perspectives on Teaching Vocabulary Through Word Puzzle Games

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates teachers’ and students’ perspectives on the use of word puzzle games in teaching English vocabulary at SMP Swasta Methodist 9 Medan. The research aims to explore how these games are implemented and how they influence students’ vocabulary learning. A qualitative descriptive approach was employed, involving one English teacher and 23 eighth-grade students. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and documentation. The data analysis process included data preparation, reading and reflection, coding and categorization, and theme development. The findings reveal that word puzzle games were effectively implemented as a student-centered learning activity that enhanced classroom engagement and reduced monotony in vocabulary instruction. Both the teacher and students expressed positive perceptions toward the use of these games. Students reported increased motivation, improved vocabulary understanding, better collaboration, and greater confidence in learning. Meanwhile, the teacher perceived word puzzle games as a valuable tool to support vocabulary mastery, stimulate critical thinking, and foster a positive and interactive classroom environment. However, several challenges were identified, including variations in students’ proficiency levels, time management constraints, classroom noise, and the need for thorough preparation. Despite these challenges, the study concludes that word puzzle games serve as an effective gamification strategy in teaching vocabulary when supported by proper planning and effective classroom management.

Word Puzzle Games, Vocabulary Teaching, Students’ Perceptions, Teacher Perceptions, Qualitative Study.

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INTRODUCTION

Vocabulary plays a fundamental and predictive role in second-language acquisition and serves as a core element of language proficiency according to Zhang, D., & Yi, T. (2024). Mastering vocabulary is a foundational component of English learning because it enables access to all four major language skills as

highlighted by Kovalenko, Y. (2024). Furthermore, Schmitt, N., & Schmitt, D. (2020) define vocabulary as the group of words introduced to learners through instructional processes that support the development of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. A growing body of research supports the integration of games in language classrooms to create dynamic environments. Vispute, D. S., & Jadhav, V. N. (2025) note that game-based learning can stimulate higher-order thinking skills, such as problem-solving and reasoning, which are beneficial for vocabulary development. Additionally, Putra, F. A. (2023) asserts that vocabulary mastery positively impacts learners' overall performance, particularly in reading and speaking tasks.

Despite its importance, junior high school students in Indonesia still face significant difficulties in learning English vocabulary as stated by Suryani, M., Santoso, H. B., Fathoni Aji, R., Hadi, S., & Schrepp, M. (2025). A primary issue is cognitive overload, which occurs when students are introduced to too many unfamiliar words simultaneously. This condition causes high mental strain and reduces the ability to retain vocabulary over long periods. Consistent with this view, Saputro, I. E., Hartono, R., Saleh, M., & Faridi, A. (2025) argue that vocabulary learning improves only when instruction is carefully structured and adjusted to students' cognitive levels. In the absence of varied stimuli, students often find it difficult to relate new vocabulary to meaningful contexts. To counter this, ABDULKADIR, I. G., MURTALA, R. U., & AHMED, S. (2025) found that interactive and visual learning activities improve student engagement and enhance memory retention. Moreover, Hamida, B., & Siham, C. (2025) emphasize that learning in collaborative and socially interactive environments, such as scaffolded instruction, significantly supports vocabulary development.

In response to these challenges, educators are turning to gamification, which involves applying game design elements like rewards or competition into educational contexts to enhance motivation according to Laksana, S. D., Saputro, A. D., Ariyanto, A., & Lestari, D. A. (2024). Puzzle word games, in particular, offer learners a playful yet purposeful way to practice vocabulary as noted by Setyawati, A. (2024). Among these, word search puzzles are especially favored for their simplicity and adaptability according to Lubis, L. S. (2021). These activities demand close attention and visual scanning, which contribute to improved concentration and retention as explained by Gui, J., & Ismail, S. M. (2024). While previous studies like the one by Marlina, M. (2024) explored student perceptions of word games, there remains a gap in understanding how these games are perceived and applied by both teachers and students in real teaching contexts.

This study addresses the need for effective vocabulary instruction for junior high school students in Indonesia, where evidence for this specific age group remains limited. The primary objective of this investigation is to describe the implementation of puzzle word games and to explore the unique perceptions and experiences of both students and teachers. By employing qualitative methods at a single school site, this research seeks to establish the significance of gamified puzzles in reducing the boredom of rote memorization. The findings are expected to provide insights into creating student-centered environments that foster active participation. Ultimately, this paper addresses the critical question of whether structured puzzle-based activities can effectively mitigate cognitive overload while improving vocabulary depth and retention in a secondary school setting.

RESEARCH METHODE

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design, focusing on providing clear and straightforward descriptions of participants' experiences and perspectives within their natural context. This design was particularly suitable for educational research as it aimed to understand how students and teachers interpreted and responded to instructional strategies. As stated by Doyle, L., McCabe, C., Keogh, B., Brady, A., & McCann, M. (2020), qualitative descriptive studies are useful when researchers intend to remain close to the data and present participants' viewpoints with minimal interpretation. In this study, the design allowed for an in-depth exploration of perceptions regarding puzzle word games without applying experimental treatments or external assumptions. The subjects of this research consisted of 23 eighth-grade students and one English teacher at SMP Methodist 9 Medan. The students were selected because they were at an intermediate level of English learning, a stage where vocabulary development played a critical role in improving reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills. At this level, students had already acquired basic vocabulary in previous grades and were capable of participating in interactive and contextual learning activities. The research was conducted between July and August 2025 at the school's location on Jl. Taduan No. 134-130, Medan, providing a natural environment to observe authentic classroom interactions.

To collect descriptive data, this study utilized three primary instruments: interview guidelines, observation sheets, and field notes, which were specifically designed to capture classroom experiences, student engagement, and teaching strategies in a natural setting. The interview guidelines consisted of open-ended questions organized into themes such as student motivation and classroom interaction. Bhalla, Bahar, & Kanapathy (2023) explained that

interview questions should be carefully designed and tested to ensure clarity and relevance. To ensure the quality of the data, the guidelines were validated by two English education lecturers and one English teacher. Furthermore, a pilot test was conducted with one student and one teacher outside the research group to identify any confusing questions, as Green, R. (2020) noted that pilot testing was essential for revising unclear questions before the main data collection phase. Data were collected through two primary techniques: semi-structured interviews and participant observation. Semi-structured interviews allowed participants to express their opinions freely through open-ended questions, a technique Karatsareas, P. (2022) identified as effective for obtaining detailed information about attitudes and motivations. Simultaneously, participant observation was carried out during classroom activities to record real-time behaviors and interactions with the puzzle games, providing rich contextual data that supported a deeper understanding of the teaching process as noted by Lim, W. M. (2025). The data analysis followed the four-step qualitative descriptive model proposed by Ravindran, V. (2019). The process began with the preparation of data, where interview recordings were transcribed and observation notes were organized. This was followed by reading and reflecting, where the researcher repeatedly reviewed the data to identify early patterns. In the coding, categorizing, and memoing stage, key statements related to motivation and learning outcomes were grouped into categories. Finally, in developing themes, these categories were refined into main themes to present meaningful findings that reflected the experiences of both the teacher and the students.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

This chapter presented the findings of the study based on interviews, observations, and documentation. The analysis was descriptive in nature, focusing on the perspectives of teachers and students toward the use of word puzzle games in teaching English vocabulary. The data were obtained from 23 students and one English teacher at SMP Methodist 9 Medan. The findings were presented thematically according to the three major themes derived from the data: the implementation process, students' perceptions, and teachers' perceptions.

Table 1.
Overall Summary of Research Findings on the Use of Word Puzzle Games in Teaching Vocabulary at SMP Methodist 9 Medan

Theme	Focus of the Theme	Key Findings (Positive Aspects)	Key Findings (Challenges/Negative Aspects)	Interpretation/ Researcher's Insight
Theme1 : The Implementation of Word Puzzle Games in the Classroom	Implementation process and classroom dynamics during puzzle-based learning.	Teacher and students perceived puzzles as enjoyable and creative. Increased motivation, enthusiasm, and engagement. Encouraged active learning and peer collaboration.	Differences in vocabulary proficiency created unequal participation. Time management issues and noisy classroom.	Word puzzle games transformed vocabulary learning from passive to active. Teachers adaptive strategies (grouping, differentiated puzzles) -helped maintain balance between enjoyment and learning.
Theme2: Students' Perceptions of Using Word Puzzle Games in Learning Vocabulary.	Students' attitudes and experiences toward learning English vocabulary through puzzles.	Students found puzzles fun, interactive, and easier to understand. Promoted competition, focus, and teamwork. Increased confidence and willingness to	Some puzzles were too difficult or timeconsuming. Students with limited vocabulary felt left behind. Competition occasionally distracted focus.	Most students showed strong motivation and enjoyment. With proper teacher guidance, puzzles

		participate.		supported collaborative learning and long-term vocabulary retention.
Theme 3: Teachers' Perceptions of Using Word Puzzle Games in Enhancing Vocabulary Learning	Teacher's views on the pedagogical value and challenges of puzzle-based instruction.	Effective for vocabulary mastery and critical thinking. Created low-anxiety, fun learning atmosphere. Promoted collaboration and active engagement.	Varied student proficiency made equal participation difficult. Some students relied on peers or lost focus quickly. Preparation and classroom management required extra effort.	The teacher recognized puzzles as a valuable gamified approach that integrates enjoyment and learning, aligning with Zhang, D., & Yi, T. (2024), who emphasize motivation and low-anxiety environments in language learning.

Implementation of Word Puzzle Games in Teaching English Vocabulary

Related to Researcher question 1: *"How are word puzzle games implemented in teaching English vocabulary?"*

The implementation of word puzzle games in teaching English vocabulary revealed generally positive responses from both the teacher and students, as reflected in interview data and classroom observations. The English teacher stated that word puzzle games were *"very useful and creative because they make the learning process more enjoyable and less monotonous."* The teacher further explained that students who were usually bored with memorizing vocabulary

from textbooks became more enthusiastic during puzzle activities and often did not realize that they were learning because they were having fun. This finding supports Laksana, S. D., Saputro, A. D., Ariyanto, A., & Lestari, D. A. (2024) who argue that structured and engaging learning activities reduce cognitive overload and increase learners' motivation in vocabulary acquisition. Classroom observations in this study showed that students actively discussed word meanings, collaborated with peers, and showed higher levels of focus during puzzle-based activities. In line with Hamida, B., & Siham, C. (2025), these interactions indicate that gamified learning can transform vocabulary instruction from a passive memorization process into an active and interactive learning experience. However, the teacher also acknowledged several challenges during implementation. As stated in the interview, *"Not all students have the same level of vocabulary knowledge. Some finish the puzzle very quickly, while others still struggle."* Time management and classroom noise were also mentioned as difficulties when students became overly excited. These challenges are consistent with Hamida, B., & Siham, C. (2025) who note that gamification requires careful scaffolding and classroom control to ensure balanced participation. To address these challenges, the teacher implemented adaptive strategies such as grouping students heterogeneously and providing puzzles with different levels of difficulty. The teacher explained, *"I usually divide students into small groups so that stronger students can help the weaker ones, and I prepare easier and more challenging puzzles."* This practice aligns with Hamida, B., & Siham, C. (2025) suggestion that effective game-based learning must be supported by differentiation and collaborative learning structures.

Students' Perceptions of Using Word Puzzle Games

Related to Researcher question 2: *"What are students' perceptions of using word puzzle games in learning vocabulary?"*

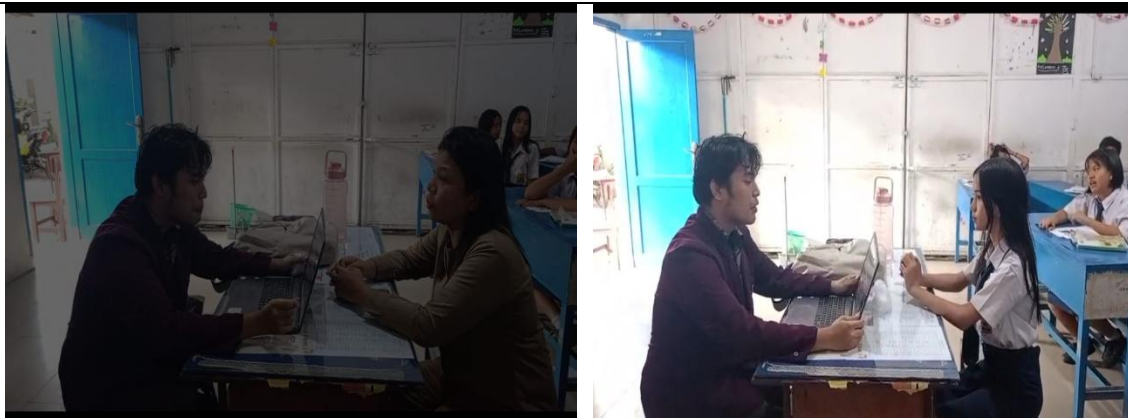
Interview data showed that most students expressed positive perceptions of learning vocabulary through word puzzle games. One student stated, *"I feel very happy when we learn vocabulary through puzzles. It feels like playing a game, not studying, and it makes me more focused."* Another student mentioned that puzzles helped them remember new words more easily and enjoy learning with friends. These responses support ABDULKADIR, I. G., MURTALA, R. U., & AHMED, S. (2025) find that interactive and visual learning activities improve motivation and memory retention. Nevertheless, contrasting voices also emerged from the interviews. Some students admitted that they struggled when puzzles contained unfamiliar words. One student explained, *"Sometimes it's hard to find the answers when I don't know the meaning of the words, so I feel left behind."* This experience reflects Suryani, M., Santoso, H. B., Fathoni Aji, R., Hadi, S., &

Schrepp, M. (2025) view that while gamification increases enjoyment, it can also cause frustration for learners with lower proficiency if sufficient guidance is not provided. Classroom observations showed that competition sometimes distracted students from learning objectives, especially when they focused more on finishing quickly than understanding the vocabulary. However, with teacher guidance and peer support, most students were able to overcome these difficulties. Overall, students' perceptions indicate that puzzle word games enhanced motivation and engagement, but their effectiveness depended on task difficulty and instructional support.

Teachers' Perceptions of Using Word Puzzle Games

Related to Researcher question 3: *What are teachers' perceptions of using word puzzle games in enhancing vocabulary learning?*

The English teacher perceived word puzzle games as an effective strategy for improving students' vocabulary mastery and classroom participation. In the interview, the teacher stated, *"Using word puzzles helps students learn new words naturally. They become more active, pay closer attention, and collaborate with their classmates."* The teacher also observed that puzzle-based activities created a more relaxed classroom atmosphere, making students less afraid of making mistakes. This perception aligns with Setyawati, A. (2024), who emphasizes that game-based learning offer learners a playful yet purposeful way to practice vocabulary, blending engagement with meaningful reinforcement. However, the teacher also highlighted limitations, including uneven student participation and the additional time required to prepare and manage the activities. Hamida, B., & Siham, C. (2025) similarly note that although gamification enhances engagement, its success depends on effective classroom management and differentiation. Despite these challenges, the teacher emphasized that the advantages of puzzle word games outweighed the drawbacks, as students showed improved motivation and vocabulary understanding. In the context of this study at SMP Methodist 9 Medan, word puzzle games were perceived as a practical and engaging instructional strategy when supported by thoughtful planning and adaptive teaching practices.



(a)

(b)

(a) An interview session with an English language educator exploring professional perspectives on the efficacy of Word Puzzle Games as a vocabulary teaching tool and (b) Gathering qualitative data from a student regarding their engagement levels and vocabulary retention when learning through Word Puzzle Games.

(Source: Faldi).

Discussion

The findings of both studies can be interpreted through established learning theories and supported by experts' perspectives. From the perspective of motivation theory, the use of engaging learning media plays a crucial role in increasing students' interest and participation. Laksana, S. D., Saputro, A. D., Ariyanto, A., & Lestari, D. A. (2024), emphasize that enjoyable and interactive learning activities significantly enhance students' motivation, which in turn supports better vocabulary acquisition. This is evident in both contexts: digital applications in the SMPN 6 Parepare study motivated students to practice independently, while word puzzle games at SMP Swasta Methodist 9 Medan fostered enthusiasm, collaboration, and active involvement during classroom activities. In addition, cognitive learning theory and cognitive load theory help explain the effectiveness of these approaches Hamida, B., & Siham, C. (2025), argue that structured and scaffolded instruction aligned with learners' cognitive readiness enables students to process new vocabulary more effectively. In the Parepare study, digital applications provided structured exposure and repetition, reducing cognitive load and supporting vocabulary retention. Similarly, the use of word puzzle games in the Methodist 9 Medan study offered meaningful contexts and interactive stimuli, allowing students to connect new vocabulary with prior knowledge through discussion and problem-solving. Interview data from the Methodist 9 Medan study further

support this interpretation, as both teachers and students reported that puzzle games made vocabulary learning easier to understand and more memorable. Overall, these findings align with previous research suggesting that interactive and learner-centered strategies enhance vocabulary learning by balancing motivation and cognitive processing. While technology-based tools promote autonomous learning, traditional game-based activities strengthen social interaction and collaborative learning. As supported by Zhang, D., & Yi, T. (2024), integrating both approaches may provide a more comprehensive and effective framework for vocabulary instruction in contemporary English classrooms.

CONCLUSION

The study at SMP Swasta Methodist 9 Medan revealed that word puzzle games effectively support vocabulary learning by making lessons more engaging, enjoyable, and student-centered. Both teachers and students perceived the games as increasing motivation, participation, focus, and vocabulary recall. Students felt more confident and involved, while challenges such as puzzle difficulty, time management, noise, and varied abilities were mitigated through peer support and teacher guidance. Overall, the benefits of word puzzle games outweighed the challenges, confirming their value as an interactive vocabulary learning tool.

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