

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

Vocabulary mastery is a crucial foundation in learning English because it played a significant role in supporting all language skills. Richards and Renandya (2022) state that vocabulary is a core element that contributes to the development of listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills, meaning that a sufficient level of vocabulary knowledge directly influenced students' capacity to comprehend texts, express their ideas, and communicate effectively. Building on this foundation, Freeman (2000, as cited in Anwar & Efransyah 2018) emphasizes that vocabulary mastery should be prioritized over grammar, as a deficiency hinders students' ability to express themselves. For this reason, vocabulary instruction should be planned in an integrated as well as engaging way through learning media such as word games.

One medium that can be used to support vocabulary learning was crossword puzzles. Puspita (2017) stated that crossword puzzles are word games consisting of numbered boxes filled with words based on specific clues, where each word was arranged horizontally and vertically. This medium is considered effective in helping students learn word meanings and relationships between words and their meanings. Additionally, this activity also trained critical thinking skills and strengthened students' memory of vocabulary in a fun and interactive learning environment.

The effectiveness of crossword puzzles for vocabulary learning has been supported through a number of earlier studies. Wefi *et al.* (2023) demonstrated that the systematic implementation of crossword puzzles in the classroom resulted in a significant increase in students' vocabulary test scores. Further corroborating these findings, Riyadi (2024) conducted a quasi-experimental study involving junior high school students and reported similar success, noting the puzzle format effectively reinforced students' understanding of word meaning. Collectively, these studies demonstrate the potential of crossword puzzles as a valuable tool in vocabulary learning.

However, despite these promising findings, the application of crossword puzzles as a vocabulary learning tool had not yet been explored in the specific context of SMPN 7 Tanjungpinang. Preliminary observations at SMPN 7 Tanjungpinang, conducted by the researcher during *Pengenalan Lingkungan Persekolahan* (PLP) program, indicated that eighth-grade students faced significant difficulties in mastering English vocabulary. One of the main difficulties was the students' limited vocabulary repertoire. They often knew only one word for a meaning and had difficulty understanding other words with similar meanings. As a result, this limitation reduced their capacity to comprehend reading materials and express their ideas with greater variety and accuracy.

Considering the problems described earlier, the researcher was interested in investigating “The Effect of Using Crossword Puzzles on Eighth-Grade Students' Vocabulary Mastery at SMPN 7 Tanjungpinang”. This study specifically focused on measuring students' ability in understanding synonyms as one aspect of

vocabulary mastery. The findings of this research are expected to offer empirical support for the contribution of crossword puzzle activities to the development of students' vocabulary mastery, particularly in junior high school English learning.

1.2 Identification of the Problem

Based on the background presented above, the problems in this study were as follows:

1. Students had difficulty developing their English vocabulary, especially in identifying words with similar meanings.
2. The learning media used in vocabulary learning were limited and lacked variety, making it difficult for students to practice vocabulary effectively.

1.3 Limitation of the Problem

This research was limited to examining how the use of crossword puzzles influenced the vocabulary mastery of eighth-grade students at SMPN 7 Tanjungpinang. The aspect of vocabulary mastery measured in this study was specifically the students' knowledge and understanding of synonyms as one aspect of vocabulary mastery.

1.4 Research Question

Referring to the problem identified above, the following research question was formulated:

“Was there any significant effect of using crossword puzzles on eighth-grade students' vocabulary mastery, particularly synonym knowledge?”

1.5 Purpose of the Study

In line with the research question, this study aimed to examine whether using crossword puzzles significantly affected the vocabulary mastery of eighth-grade students at SMPN 7 Tanjungpinang, particularly in improving their synonym knowledge.

1.6 Significance of the Study

1. Theoretical Significance

This study was expected to contribute empirical findings concerning the effectiveness of crossword puzzles as a learning medium for developing synonym knowledge as part of junior high school students' vocabulary mastery.

2. Practical Significance

a. For the English Teachers

This study offered practical insights for teachers seeking innovative learning media to support vocabulary learning, especially in teaching synonyms through crossword puzzles.

b. For the Students

Through crossword puzzle activities, this study provided students with a more enjoyable and interactive way of learning, helping them expand their vocabulary knowledge in recognizing synonyms.

c. For Other Researchers

The findings of this study may serve as a reference for future studies focusing on game-based learning or vocabulary instruction in different educational contexts.

1.7 Definition of Key Terms

1. Crossword Puzzles

In this study, crossword puzzles are defined as a learning medium in the form of word games arranged in a grid, where students completed the empty boxes using words that matched the given clues. The puzzles were implemented during treatment sessions to encourage vocabulary learning to be more interesting.

2. Vocabulary Mastery

Vocabulary mastery refers to students' ability to understand English word meanings, particularly through recognizing synonyms or similar meanings in context. In this study, vocabulary mastery was limited to synonym knowledge, which included students' ability to identify appropriate synonyms of given words. Students' vocabulary mastery was quantitatively assessed using the scores obtained from the pre-test and post-test