IMPROVING VOCABULARY ACHIEVEMENT OF THE XI GRADERS OF SMKN 1 PAKONG-PAMEKASAN THROUGH INTERACTIVE CROSSWORD PUZZLE

Andik Tohari
SMK Negeri 1 Pakong, Pamekasan
Jl. Raya Pakong-Pamekasan, Madura-Jawa Timur
andik.tohari@gmail.com

Abstract: The difficulties experienced by students in communication, comprehending texts, and classroom instructions emerged as a consequence of their low vocabulary mastery. In this research, a significant difference from the two mean scores gained from vocabulary tests and the recorded communicative activities among students during the class are empirical evidence proving the benefit of implementing interactive crossword puzzle as a vocabulary teaching instruction. Considering the notable values of this strategy, it is productive for English teachers to take into consideration this as an alternative to improve their students’ vocabulary achievement as well as their active involvement during the lesson.

Keywords: interactive crossword puzzle, vocabulary achievement, active involvement

As stated by Thornbury (2002:1), all languages have words. Language emerges first as words, both historically and in terms of the way each of us learned our first and any subsequent languages. This obviously shows that there will be no language without words, without vocabulary, Hatch and Brown (1995:1). Later, Wilkins in Thornbury (2002:13) argues, without grammar very little can be conveyed ... but without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed. Meantime, McCarthy (1990:viii) states that no matter how well the student learns grammar, no matter how successfully the sounds of L2 are mastered, without words to express a wide range of meanings, communication in an L2 just cannot happen in any meaningful way.

Learning a language cannot be separated from learning vocabulary because the language itself is made up of words, the vocabulary. Nation (2001:9) emphasizes that second language learners need to know very large numbers of words. So, if a person wants to effectively use a language, they should really master its vocabulary. Napa (1991:6) says that vocabulary is one of the language components and that no language exists without words.

Meanwhile, based on classroom observations, the students get difficulties when they communicate in English. They sometimes know the grammar, but they do not master the vocabulary well. Consequently, they cannot communicate using English with the teacher as well as with their classmates; they cannot give opinions and ideas during the lesson, understand the classroom instructions, do worksheets, or even answer questions verbally.

In addition, it was revealed that the students tend to be passive in class by expecting translation of every instruction given in the classroom. This condition forces the teacher to give classroom instructions by using bahasa Indonesia. Further, another problem comes from the students’ low interest in the subject. They say that English is boring and the teaching technique is no longer interesting for them. As one of consequences, all the students scored below the KKM in preliminary test, their mean score was about 24; even 5 of them scored 0. Therefore, at this critical point, teachers should agree with Wilkins (1983:14) who rightly states that students’ learning depends on the effectiveness of the teacher’s techniques. So, teachers should find out an effective technique to improve their students’ achievement.

Concerning issue on students’ low interest in learning vocabulary, to some extent, we should agree with Tarigan and Tarigan (1986:39) who state that EFL teachers must avoid monotonous teaching technique which makes the students lose interest and motivation. Regarding this, Williams (2007:64) states that the use of educational games such as crossword puzzles are the attempts to make learning more fun and motivational regardless of the level of educational experience. This statement supports Latorre and Baeza (1975:45) who point out that puzzles can be used as a means to relieve the strain of students because of a lot of work demanding concentrated attention.

Moreover, European Language Institute, through English with Crosswords, writes that language teachers all over the world agree that visual material can significantly aid the comprehension of new vocabulary. Pictures provide context and unambiguous meaning, thereby allowing students to learn and remember words more easily. However, considering the revolution in education and IT (Information and Technology)
development, the teaching strategies in the future must also meet these two prerequisites: visual and computer based. Thus, interactive crossword puzzle can be a good solution to overcome this situation.

Methods

This is Collaborative Classroom Action Research (CAR), with the application of interactive crossword puzzle to improve the English vocabulary mastery of the XI graders of SMKN 1 Pakong- Pamekasan. The subjects are 23 students of XI-TKJ-A class in the second semester of 2013/2014 AY that consists of 17 males and 6 females. The interactive crossword puzzle used in this research is designed by Crossword Forge, a crossword puzzle maker software. Meanwhile, the topic adopted as the teaching material is ‘Professions’, including the kinds of professions and the jobs or duties of certain professions. Nouns and Verbs related to the teaching materials are the parts of speech of which will be developed later in the process of making media (see Appendices 5a and 5b).

Further, this study applies Kemmis and McTaggart action research model (1988:11). Based on this research model, another cycle will be carried out when the previous cycle fails. As pointed out by Latief (2013:143), a classroom action research is done in several cycles, each of which is repeated in the following cycle if the result is not satisfactory, yet with a revised lesson plan. Hence, it is impossible to define the number of cycles needed in a CAR since the result of each cycle is unpredictable.

Since this is collaborative CAR, the researcher will be accompanied by an English teacher; the researcher will act as the EFL teacher who implements the puzzle while the teacher will record the respond of the students toward the implementation (see Appendix 1a for the developed teaching scenario) of the puzzle through field notes (see Appendices 2a, 2b and 2c).

This research aims at gaining two criteria of success: students’ vocabulary improvement and their active participation during the lessons. The data about these achievements will be derived from vocabulary test (see Appendices 3a and 3b) and field notes (see Appendices 2a, 2b, and 2c).

By considering the fact that the subjects are heterogeneous in the level of vocabulary mastery, it is not ‘fair’ to determine the same criteria of success for all students. Thus, the criteria of success are formulated as follows. First, the students will be classified into three classes (based on the result of preliminary test, see Appendices 1b and 4a): low, middle, and high. For those who belong to the low class (scoring 0-30), they are expected to be able to score equal to or above 50. Second, the students belong to the middle class (scoring 31-40), they are expected to score equal to or above 60. Last, for those who belong to the high class (scoring 41-50), they are targeted to score equal to or above 75.

However, the success of using interactive crossword puzzle as vocabulary instruction is also determined by the number of students’ active participation during the class. In this matter, the strategy is successful if the number of students’ participation is getting higher (compared to the previous one recorded in classroom observation).

Findings and Discussion

Based on the result of the vocabulary test (see Appendix 3c), it is clearly seen that the interactive crossword puzzle can significantly increase the students’ achievement up to the targeted level. As the evidence, 22 out of 23 students successfully gained the criteria of success, even more. Only 1 student failed. Meanwhile, 13 out of 14 students classified into low level competence, could successfully reached the criteria of success by achieving 76.85 (mean score). While, 4 students classified into middle level competence, had successfully attained the criteria of success by scoring 82 (mean score). Further, 5 students classified into high level competence, could also achieve the criteria of success by scoring 96 (mean score). Finally, 4 students (2 students in low level and the other 2 in high class/level) scored 100.

Further, based on the data collected through the field notes, several conclusions can be drawn concerning the effectiveness of the implementation of the interactive crossword puzzle. First, beside its profound effect in the vocabulary teaching objectives—promoting the students’ competence in both learning new vocabulary items and helping them to improve retention of the words through their long-term memory, the interactive crossword puzzle was also found useful in improving students’ involvement during the lesson. Secondly, it can also create such a conducive atmosphere for the teaching and learning process in the classroom. Third, it can be such an effective way to build students’ mood. Finally, the implementation of the interactive crossword puzzle can also make students learn new words without relying on any dictionary.

Interactive Crossword Puzzle as a Teaching Strategy

Based on the result of the vocabulary test, it was found out that the students’ vocabulary achievement was improved up to the targeted level. It was recorded that 22 out of 23 students (95.65%) successfully achieved the criteria of success. Even when the minimum passing grade (KKM=72) is set as the criteria of success, the number of students who can pass that criteria is still high, 19 out of 23 students (82.60%).

The 61st TEFLIN International Conference, UNS Solo 2014
In line with previous explanation, this finding supports Crossman and Crossman (1983) and Whisenand and Dunphy (2010) who found out that the students doing the crossword puzzles as a study aid achieved higher score than those who did not. They also found out that the other major advantages of crossword puzzles are that they expand vocabulary, stimulate the mind, encourage logical thinking and help to improve retention of facts and association of concepts. Moreover, this finding also supports Saxena, Nesbitt, Pahwa and Mills (2009), and Franklin, Peat, and Lewis (2003) who wrote that crossword puzzles is a useful tool for reviewing and reinforcing concepts. It can benefit students in providing them with an opportunity to evaluate their level of knowledge and help them to improve retention.

In addition, crosswords have been found to increase students’ confidence in their ability and understanding (Crossman and Crossman, 1983; Childers, 1996; Raines, 2010; and Robertson and Howells, 2008). The sense of accomplishment from successfully solving one clue will encourage students to continue toward the completion of the whole puzzle. This believe, more or less, is in line with the one Karim and Hasbullah (1986) hold that by using crossword puzzle, students are trained to look for the relationship of the answer in the boxes given. Thus, crossword puzzle can also be such an effective way to review, recall, and reinforce words and/or concepts previously learnt.

**Interactive Crossword Puzzle as a Way to Promote Students’ Involvement, Motivation, Mood, and Affective Atmosphere**

The improvement on students’ involvement in vocabulary learning supports Thornbury (2002:30) who clarifies that learners need to be actively involved in the learning of words; and it is good to know that the implementation of this strategy can really improve the students’ involvement during the lesson.

Further, this finding is also in line with another research finding stating that one major advantage of using crossword puzzle as teaching instruction is that most students associate crossword puzzles with game playing and recreation (Whisenand and Dunphy, 2010; Raines, 2010). Thus, incorporating crossword puzzles as a learning activity can help to make the subject more fun and to increase students’ engagement with the course material (Serna and Azor, 2011). Moreover, these statements confirm what Latorre and Baeza (1975:45) have defined that puzzles can stimulate interest and participation of the students in a course.

Next, the second finding showed that the advantage of implementing crossword puzzle is that it contributes greatly on providing a good atmosphere for the teaching and learning process. This research finding corresponds Nation’s (1974) belief that a game (one of which is crossword puzzle) is an activity that will give fun to the students. Moreover, it is also a source of relaxation to avoid boredom and monotonous teaching. Thus, implementing the interactive crossword puzzle can be a good alternative to bring the students relaxed and create fun atmosphere that may enable them to learn the subject more easily. Additionally, this standing supports Rodger (1981) who states that the use of game is to relax the students by engaging them in a stress–reducing task. Finally, this finding also supports Palmer and Rodgers (1983) who states that research on language learning has revealed that student’s motivation and affective atmosphere in the classroom have great influence on the acquisition of language competence.

On the other hand, it is found out that students’ psychological aspect is much influenced by the strategy applied during the class. It is believed that if the mood of the students is well managed, it contributes greatly to the success of learning process. The mood itself is indirectly generated by one of the puzzle strengths as stated by Latorre and Baeza that puzzles seem to stimulate interest and participation in a course because they constitute a form of play and recreation (1975:45). In line with this statement, Jones (2007) argues that crossword puzzle is associated with recreation. Students who might normally hate tests find crossword puzzle much less threatening.

**Conclusions and Suggestions**

Based on the results of the research, it is empirically proved that the interactive crossword puzzle contributes greatly on improving students’ vocabulary achievement up to the targeted level, even more. Besides, as a side effect reported through the field notes, it can also productively promote students’ involvement, motivation, mood, and affective atmosphere during the lesson. It is written that more than 20 students (out of 23) were actively participated in the teaching and learning process. It shows that they really enjoyed the lesson, were more motivated to learn, more active, and more enthusiastic.

Additionally, by using crossword puzzle in vocabulary teaching, students do not only learn about the vocabulary used as the main stems in the puzzle, but they also learn many new words through the given clues. At the same time, they learn the meaning of every new word by finding out the relationship among the clues given. This ‘mechanism’ can be a good solution to overcome students’ reluctance in using dictionary. As the result, the new words may easily be imparted at one time without any dictionary.

Moreover, when the students successfully answer a clue, they will get a sense of accomplishment. They will feel more challenged to solve the other clues. Consider it or not, this can keep the students stay in tune,
motivated, and relaxed so that they are more psychologically prepared to learn. This positive learning atmosphere does benefit them.

Last but not the least, by considering the advantage of implementing crossword puzzle in the teaching of vocabulary, it is recommended that English teachers will utilize this media in their language classrooms, particularly in the teaching of English vocabulary. At the end, it is recommended for future researchers to conduct similar research to different graders; or, even higher education level such as university students.

References


