

CONTEXTUAL CROSSWORDS: A GAMIFIED APPROACH TO SLANG ACQUISITION AND CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS

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Abstract

This study addresses the effectiveness of contextualized crossword puzzles as a gamified learning tool for developing slang and critical thinking skills among EFL college students. Motivated by gaps in traditional English language teaching, which often exclude informal language and higher-order thinking, this study implemented slang-focused vocabulary learning with critical thinking through a contextualized crossword puzzle format. A mixed-methods explanatory approach was used, combining quantitative data from 50 students via a Likert scale survey and qualitative insights from interviews with 3 participants with varying levels of achievement. Quantitative findings showed high levels of students' agreement with the usefulness of the activity in developing slang comprehension, engagement and analytical reasoning. The qualitative results further revealed that the students found the puzzles intellectually challenging, engaging, and useful for problem solving and logical reasoning. Five main themes emerged: engagement and fun, vocabulary acquisition, critical thinking development, overcoming challenges, and problem solving. These findings are in line with constructivist learning theory and Bloom's Taxonomy, which stated that crosswords provide meaningful cognitive engagement while encouraging real-world language use. This study emphasizes the importance of incorporating gamification strategies into the EFL classroom and suggests contextualized crosswords as a practical, motivating, and educational medium to unify formal learning with informal, everyday communication.

Keywords: Contextual Crossword; Slang Acquisition; Critical Thinking; Gamification

INTRODUCTION

Do students speak formally whenever they communicate on a daily conversation? In the field of English language learning, traditional approaches often focus on structured formal language acquisition, leaving shortcomings in equipping students to communicate in real life where informal language, such as slang, plays an important role. Nowadays, slang is acknowledged as a dynamic linguistic phenomenon that includes both specific and broad meanings, often featuring newly coined words and innovative or expanded definitions (Xiurong, 2024). Slang is a prominent language variation frequently used in students' daily interactions, enhancing communication by making it more relatable and effective in informal settings (Pongsapan, 2022). Slang is also described as language primarily used to discuss rebellious behavior, activities the speaker wants to keep confidential, or topics for which the speaker lacks sufficient vocabulary (Pilipei & Pylypenko, 2020).

Teenagers prefer using slang over formal language as it demonstrates a sense of unity and belonging within their social group (Ambarsari et al., 2020). One major source of exposure to slang is social media, which serves as a dynamic platform for cultural exchange and language evolution. The use of informal English slang on social media is a prominent feature of this trend, as platforms like X, Instagram, and TikTok play an increasingly significant role in everyday communication (Mahardika, 2023). Let's say slang term *slay*,

which conveys admiration or praise for a person's style or behavior (Ngoc Toan, 2022). Furthermore, the slang term *mood* is also often used, it describes feeling or emotions (Rahma & Moetia, 2024). Likewise, the word or term such as *lol*, *bros*, or *squad* frequently appear in content as casual expressions of humor, friendship, or a sense of unity among teenagers (Naumi, 2024). In short, social media has significant influence on the vocabulary choices of its user, both in formal and informal contexts.

Vocabulary refers to the comprehension of words and their definitions (Feruza Abdulazizovna, 2024). Vocabulary is considered the most important part of a language, and it is essential for foreign and second language learners to acquire language mastery (Suwanasilp & Durongbhandhu, 2023). Slang language is used widely in social media and daily conversation, adding variety to language and enriching vocabulary (Yuniar et al., 2023). However, in formal English learning, especially in the context of EFL (English as a Foreign Language), teaching is still dominated by textbooks and formal language structures, so that little space is given to teach everyday expressions or a variety of informal settings (Yang, 2020). Formal English education typically emphasized structured language forms, such as grammar rules and academic vocabulary, which often results in limited exposure to slang or informal expressions (Bin-Hady & Al-Tamimi, 2021).

The lack of slang-focused instruction in formal EFL curricula creates a critical paradox: while students are required to attain fluency in English, they are not capable to engage in authentic, everyday conversations where informal expressions and slang are prevalent (Pilipei & Pylypenko, 2020). Many EFL learners struggle to adjust in different conversations because their learning focuses more on grammar and vocabulary than real-life language use (Hadi Wibowo et al., 2024). If they don't get enough practice with informal expressions, they might feel out of place in everyday or professional conversations. This shows the importance of teaching both formal and informal language to help students communicate better in today's global world (Elmahdi & Hezam, 2020).

To help fill these gaps, new instructional strategies such as gamification have proven useful in language learning. Gamification has become used extensively in domains including: business, technology, and education (Bin-Hady & Al-Tamimi, 2021). Features including points, badges, levels, and rewards help to increase pupils' motivation and make learning more engaging and enjoyable (Roseni & Muho, 2024). Gamification in foreign language instruction has found to enhance actual-life language use and boost student engagement (Zhihao & Zhonggen, 2022). Using contextual crossword puzzles is one of these gamifications which used slang terms as a classroom exercise.

Players in a contextual crossword game utilize clues and a predetermined number of letters to look for the right words (Dahlia et al., 2023). Contextual Crosswords also benefit learners in several ways encourage them to consider vocabulary in a way that will help them to memorize words and meanings (Tambaritji & Atmawidjaja, 2020). Unlike tasks emphasizing arbitrary vocabulary or facts, contextual crosswords directly relate the answers and clues to the lesson subject, whether it be history, science, or slang (Wu, 2023). By means of contextual crosswords, teachers may plan interesting and interactive learning exercises beyond conventional memorization methods (Zhihao & Zhonggen, 2022).

Teaching slang with gamification also helps students develop critical thinking abilities which ones are fundamental in 21st century education. Critical thinking is considered one of the fundamental cognitive skills and is a key indicator of the quality of education (Alsaleh, 2020). Furthermore, gamification and critical thinking are closely linked because gamified

learning integrates game-based elements that naturally stimulate critical thinking processes (Huseinović, 2023). Gamification provides immediate feedback, encouraging learners to reflect on their decisions and refine their approaches, which is a fundamental practice in critical thinking (Jodoi et al., 2021). By incorporating these approaches, gamification enhances learning engagement while fostering critical thinking through activities that encourage analysis, evaluation, and problem-solving in agreeable and meaningful contexts (Andanty et al., 2025).

This study introduces contextual crosswords as a gamified tool for teaching slang words and enhancing critical thinking in EFL students. By integrating informal language with cognitive skills such as analysis and problem-solving, it offers a novel approach to engage students beyond traditional methods. The novelty of this research lies in its focus on students majoring in English language education, a group that has been underrepresented in previous studies. Similar research exploring the communication needs of higher education students is limited, and this gap is significant because the communication demands at the university level are far more complex than those at the primary or secondary level. The aim is to explore how this method improves students' use of slang in real-life conversations and boosts their critical thinking abilities, bridging the gap between formal language education and real-world communication skills. Therefore, the research questions of this study are, what are students' perceptions of using crossword for slang acquisition and critical thinking skills? Then, how effective are crossword as a learning tool for enhancing students' critical thinking skills?

METHOD

This study uses a mixed-method explanatory approach, combining both quantitative and qualitative methods to fully understand how crossword can help students learn slang words and improve critical thinking skills. Brings together the strengths of both approaches to provide a more complete picture of a research problem (Olaghere, 2022). Quantitative data provides measurable and objective evidence of the impact of crosswords while qualitative data explores students' perceptions and experiences in-depth, adding a human element to the findings.

The participants in this study were English major students, as they are actively engaged in advanced English language learning, where acquisition of slang and critical thinking are crucial. In the quantitative part of this study, approximately 50 students were picked at random to fill out a survey, share their experiences, challenges, and thoughts. This helped the research cover both personal experiences and measurable data. For the qualitative part, three participants who had used contextual crossword puzzles in their learning were interviewed in depth.

This study used two types of instruments: a structured survey questionnaire designed by the researcher for the quantitative section, and interview questions for the qualitative section. The survey uses a Likert scale to determine perceptions, motivations, and the quality of contextual crossword puzzles in supporting slang language learning and critical thinking skills development. Structured interviews were conducted to obtain detailed descriptions from participants about their experiences using crossword puzzles in acquiring critical thinking skills.

To validate the instruments, researchers used expert validity for both the questionnaire and interview questions. The questionnaire was reviewed by experts in language education and gamification to carefully measure perceptions, motivations, and the effectiveness of

contextual crossword puzzles. Similarly, the interview questions were researched and refined based on expert input to ensure that they were clear, relevant, and capable of eliciting in-depth responses about students' experiences and the development of their critical thinking skills.

This research utilizes mixed methods to accurately examine the data. Quantitative data from the Likert scale survey will be analyzed using descriptive statistics, such as averages and frequency counts. The Google form shows the opinions of some participants on using contextualized crossword puzzles as a tool to improve slang acquisition and critical thinking. On the other hand, qualitative data obtained from the interviews will be examined by thematic analysis. This will result in the participants' experiences after answering the crossword puzzle. Both methods are conducted to provide a structured explanation of how effective crossword puzzles are in developing students' learning skills.

This approach applies mixed methods and generates both quantitative and qualitative data validity through different validations. Likert scale questionnaires were developed by linking to previous research and tested by experts through gamification learning to check that the designed questionnaires were able to analyze the perception, motivation, and effectiveness of crossword puzzles. A pilot test was also conducted to ensure that the questions were appropriate and complete. For qualitative data, triangulation was applied to develop validity by linking data from interviews and participants' opinions. The transcripts of the interviews were scrutinized in a structured manner. The participants also assessed the accuracy of the interview transcripts and the opinions they had expressed. The combination of the validation methods will encourage confidence and create clear insights into use of crossword puzzles to learn slang and acquire critical thinking skills.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This study implemented a mixed method to analyze the extent of the effectiveness of crossword puzzles in encouraging students to acquire slang in improve critical thinking. Data were generated from two sources: an online survey with 50 participants and structured interviews with 3 selected participants. The quantitative data showed a general description of their engagement, vocabulary acquisition, and critical thinking, while the qualitative data created insights into their experiences after using the crossword puzzle. Together, these data sets generate a comprehensive understanding of the impact and multiple benefits derived from this activity. Based on the analysis, five main themes emerged from both data: engagement and enjoyment, vocabulary acquisition and practical use, development of critical thinking skills, overcoming challenges, and problem solving and logical reasoning. These themes will be explained and elaborated also supported by direct quotes from participants to provide and demonstrate deeper context and evidence for the findings.

What are students' perceptions of using crossword for slang acquisition and critical thinking skills?

The quantitative data from this survey shows the exact views on their perceptions of the use of crossword puzzles in understanding slang and improving critical thinking skills. The statements were classified into two main categories: slang acquisition and critical thinking skills. The findings showed a consistently high percentage of agreement, indicating that the participants not only found the learning experience enjoyable, but also perceived its educational value. Their opinions suggest that crossword puzzles, as a form of gamified

learning, can support vocabulary enrichment, increase confidence in using slang, and strengthen important cognitive skills such as analysis outlines these findings in more detail.

Table 1. Students' Perceptions of Using Crossword

Category	Survey Statement	% Agree / Strongly Agree
Slang Acquisition	The crossword made learning slang fun	76%
	The activity improved my understanding of slang	84%
	I feel more confident using slang after doing the crossword	68%
Critical Thinking Skills	The crossword required me to think critically	80%
	I had to analyze clues deeply before answering	84%
	I evaluated several answer options before choosing the correct one	76%
	The crossword helped me connect ideas and think logically	84%
	It required me to use problem-solving and decision-making	88%
	Crossword activities can help improve students' critical thinking	84%

Slang acquisition, the results show that crossword puzzles are very effective in engaging students with slang vocabulary in a fun way. When asked whether crossword activities make learning slang fun, 76% of respondents (38 out of 50 participants) agreed or strongly agreed. This explains a clear trend that the gamification nature of crossword puzzles can boost their motivation and make it a more enjoyable learning process that with traditional vocabulary practice. Furthermore, 84% of respondents (42 out of 50 participants) agreed that the crossword puzzle can help improve their understanding of slang and apply its use in daily communication. This high percentage shows that students are not only familiar with the slang terms, but also have a better understanding of the meaning, context, and correct usage. This shows the effectiveness of contextual teaching in helping students to memorize vocabulary in a more in-depth and thorough way. In addition, their confidence in using English was boosted by this activity. A total of 68% of the respondents (34 out of 50 participants) reported that they were more agreeable after solving the crossword puzzle and being able to apply it. This proves that the challenge of solving the crossword not only provides new words, but also helps them to implement slang in real life.

Critical thinking skills, based on the results of the survey, show that crossword puzzles can encourage critical thinking. Crossword puzzle also challenged them to figure out the clues, with 80% of respondents (40 out of 50 participants) agreeing. It can be described that crossword puzzles encourage higher-order thinking, because they are required to guess clues and think of many words. Furthermore, the process for solving and knowing the clues that have been given. A total of 84% of respondents (42 out of 50 participants) said that it was necessary to consider each clue before solving the problem. This proves that the crossword

encourages cognitive ability, to act quickly rather than just guessing word. The next component is operative evaluative reasoning. About 76% of respondents (38 out of 50 participants) gave an affirmative answer. That is, the crossword challenge helped them to seize the opportunity to be careful in making decisions and to evaluate judgments carefully.

Next, 84% of respondents (42 out of 50 participants) reported that crossword puzzles encourage them to combine several creative ideas, and improve their logical thinking skills, which illustrates that the main takeaways from slang puzzles are supporting thinking and analyzing patterns. Also, 88% of respondents (44 out of 50 participants) reported that they agree that solving crossword puzzles can develop good decision-making skills. These high scores demonstrate that this activity promotes students to overcome active challenges, instead of just memorizing some information. Ultimately, 84% of respondents (42 out of 50 participants) thought that crossword puzzles could contribute to their understanding of critical thinking. This means that they acknowledge the broader educational potential of crossword puzzles more than just a classroom activity. They also noticed that crosswords can promote language learning and cognitive growth.

How effective are crossword as a learning tool for enhancing students' critical thinking skills?

The qualitative findings complemented the quantitative results, providing a more complete picture of how crossword puzzles operate as a valuable learning tool. Despite the numbers, participants reported that the activity was stimulating both intellectually and emotionally, and assisted their thinking skills. This goes to show that crossword puzzles not only help with language learning, but also establishes 21st century skills like perseverance, creative thinking, and problem-solving. Moreover, when encountering challenges, the students exhibited great effort and perceived difficulties as an important learning opportunity.

The qualitative data from the interviews with the 3 participants IA, BCC, and NRA in the different grades provided precious knowledge about their own experiences using contextualized crossword puzzles to learn slang and develop critical thinking skills. These participants were deliberately chosen to demonstrate different levels of achievement, thus aiding this study to gain a better comprehend how students of diverse capabilities engaged with crossword puzzle challenge. From the interviews, five main themes were identified: engagement and enjoyment, vocabulary acquisition and practical use, development of critical thinking skills, overcoming challenges, and problem solving and logical reasoning. These themes highlight how using crossword puzzles as a gamified activity can support both language learning and cognitive growth.

1. Engagement and Enjoyment

One of the most strongest and noticeable themes was the enjoyment and excitement participants felt while doing the crossword puzzle. All participants said that the activity was fun and sharpened their intellectual skills. The game like format of the crossword also created an engaging atmosphere that expressed their desire to participate and complete the task. IA expressed her experience as: "happy and also challenged because there is something interesting to solve the TTS, especially with the theme of slang words". This shows a positive response from two emotional sides and the fun from the play aspect and the encouragement from the challenge. BCC also shared the same opinion, saying: "it was interesting and fun because when I did it, there were many challenges". NRA confirmed this by stating that the activity was: "very happy and felt challenged, because this might be one of the new methods".

The use of slang-themed crossword puzzles further fostered their sense of interest, as it could be related and relevant to their daily language use. These responses show that gamification through crossword puzzles increases student engagement by linking learning to fun and challenge.

2. Vocabulary Acquisition and Practical Use

The second theme highlighted the effectiveness of the crossword puzzle in expanding students' slang vocabulary and implementing its practical use in conversations. All participants agreed that they acquired a lot of new slang vocabulary, which they had never known and used before. IA reflected on the value of the learning, saying: "it is very helpful because I know more about the meaning and how to use slang words that I didn't understand before". BCC echoed this, explaining that the crossword puzzle was: "very helpful because from it I can learn a lot of slang that I didn't know before". NRA also specifically mentioned and learned contemporary slang terms such as "mewing" and "rizz", and explained that the crossword puzzle helped her: "know more about the meaning of the words and the context in which they are used in everyday conversation". This finding shows that crossword puzzles not only encourage vocabulary acquisition, but also can provide students with an understanding of the social context and application of slang terms, thus developing their confidence and ability to communicate in the real world.

3. Development of Critical Thinking Skills

Participants systematically revealed that critical thinking is a key and beneficial component of working and solving crossword puzzles. They recognized the need to identify clues, consider possibilities, and double-check answers, all of which require higher-order thinking. IA said: "we must also think hard and have to relate the answers to each other to match the answers". BCC described the process as requiring: "analyzing from the clues, looking for connections as well". NRA expressed cognitive pressure by saying: "I also had to think of a dozen words at once to find the right answer". These quotes suggest how the task can encourage and enhance the ability to problem-solve, make logical connections and apply analytical skills, which are important indicators of critical thinking development. As such, crossword puzzles are not just a vocabulary task, but a platform for enhancing key evaluative and analytical skills for language learners.

4. Overcoming Challenges

While there were many benefits gained, participants expressed some challenges encountered during the activities. However, these obstacles were still often seen as opportunities to learn more and overcome problems. IA found it challenging when encountering unfamiliar slang, stating: "the challenge was when I had never heard certain slang words", which slowed her progress but encouraged further exploration. BCC explained the ambiguity of certain clues, stating: "there are some words that mean almost the same thing", requiring her to think carefully about which choice best suited the context. NRA acknowledged this and expressed her opinion: "even though Gen Z is not so updated about these slang words", showing that even students who are familiar with informal language can face new challenges in translating rarely used slang terms or new terms. These challenges do not disrupt or impede learning, but instead spur and motivate students to think creatively, find

additional context, and be diligent in solving and dealing with complex problem-solving tasks.

5. Problem Solving and Logical Reasoning

Finally, participants agreed that solving crossword puzzles consistently contributed to their logical reasoning and problem-solving skills. The ability to understand clues, try out different possibilities, and substitute answers based on interconnected words helped to strengthen and encourage their cognitive flexibility and reasoning ability. BBC illustrated this by saying: “crossword puzzles can make us think more logically, creatively too, keep finding solutions to the problem”. NRA said that the activity encouraged her to: “look for connections between words, find solutions by thinking of new word meanings”. IA emphasized how careful and organized thinking is when solving crossword puzzles, and said that it: “trains students to think critically, find word connections, and come up with creative solutions”. This proves that crossword puzzles can build important skills such as problem solving, and will benefit not only language learning but also mental development.

The findings of the two data sets reveal that contextualized crossword puzzles are a varied and flexible medium for building language skills. The quantitative data explained how they activity influenced vocabulary and critical thinking, while the qualitative data explained that the activity encouraged students’ enthusiasm for problem solving. Although some students stated that certain slang words were quite difficult, the fact that the challenge could motivate them towards improving their problem-solving skills. From the above explanation, it can be emphasized that crossword media can be an interesting and fun teaching material.

Discussion

This research examines how students perceive the use of contextualized crossword puzzles to augment their slang acquisition and critical thinking by exploring survey and interview results. The findings strongly agree that linking games and learning will encourage EFL learners to master language and thinking skills (Andanty et al., 2025). Although slang is often overlooked, this study has shown the benefits of solving a crossword puzzle about slang. The discussion below will link and compare contextualized crossword puzzles with previous research.

Students’ Perceptions of Implementing Contextual Crossword Puzzles for Slang Acquisition and Critical Thinking Skills

This study explained that some students saw crossword puzzles as a useful and interesting medium to implement. They realized the activity was not only a fun task, but also an innovative medium to boost their language skills (Agustina Eliasanti et al., 2024). For this reason, there is a statement in accordance with constructivist learning theory, which says that students gain understanding through slang and implement slang also encourage cognitive abilities in identifying (Nerita et al., 2023). In this regard, crossword puzzles enable students to engage in informal language learning in a purposeful context that also stimulates higher order thinking.

This utilization of crossword media as a media variation in increasing student enthusiasm has been proven (Dyah Pristanti & Syahria, 2024). Compared to conventional methods that only focus on memorization, crossword activities can be a learning that makes

students more active (Zagoto & Laia, 2022). Participants from the survey and interviews shared that the activity was engaging, challenging, and helped them to be considerate in terms of problem solving. This connects with previous research on gamification as a tool to encourage students in language learning. One of them, stated that online crossword games increased students' enthusiasm for learning English by making lessons more fun and less stressful (Rizqi & Usman, 2021). Similarly, another researcher revealed that crossword puzzles encourage students to expand new vocabulary effectively (Alfaini & Ma'rifatulloh, 2023).

Beside being enjoyable, students also saw the educational benefits of the game (Syahria, 2021). Many participants said that by solving the puzzles and checking the answers, they gained a better understanding of slang, including its meaning, how to use it correctly, and its importance. This corroborates the notion that active learning strategies, such as solving puzzles, can improve learners' ability to learn and apply new vocabulary. It also reveals that contextualized crosswords can act as a link between formal classroom instruction and informal real-world language use a gap that often has not been addressed in traditional EFL curricula (Shohib, 2024).

However, it is important to understand the potential challenges and issues associated with using gamified learning tools. Not all crossword implementations are equally effective, and some may even interfere with the learning process if not designed well. The researcher says that the potential misuse of gamification, noting that when the game system gets in the way of leaning objectives such as when students focus more on "winning" or earning points that on understanding the content the educational impact may suffer (Hadi Mogavi et al., 2022). This points to the importance of careful instructional design: crossword puzzles should be tailored to learning objectives, crafted to match students' proficiency levels, and composed with appropriate and meaningful vocabulary. Furthermore, some students may find slang vocabulary difficult or unfamiliar, especially if it is culturally specific or recently coined. This can cause confusion or reduce interest if students do not receive proper guidance and explanations. Therefore, even though most participants responded positively to the activity, teachers should select slang words carefully and provide clear context or examples to helps students understand better.

Effectiveness of Crosswords as a Learning Tool for Enhancing Critical Thinking Skills

The findings of this study clearly show that contextualized crosswords help students not only improve their language skills but also develop critical thinking. Both the survey and interviews revealed that solving the crossword made students think carefully, gather information, understand connections, and explore many options before finding the right answer. This challenge relates to the connected thinking skills in Bloom's Taxonomy, specifically evaluation and analysis (Sela et al., 2023). The crossword structure assist students in applying critical thinking as it is intertwined with higher-order reasoning skills.

By this research, students conveyed that to solve the crossword puzzle they had to be thorough in considering the clues carefully. In this process, students gradually developed metacognitive skills, which is the ability to solve problems carefully (Lamjunida Siregar et al., 2023). This ability is one of the main abilities to solve the problems and encourage the ability to think independently and from various points of view (Rizqi & Usman, 2021). Some of the challenges contained in crossword puzzles can encourage them to develop memory skills (Khaira, 2021).

Several studies presented related data to support these findings. For example, a study that implemented Si-GEMAS, a crossword puzzle learning tool in a math class, evidenced a clear development in students' enthusiasm for problem solving, especially in non-language subjects (Mochamad Cholily et al., 2023). It can be argued that a more thorough implementation of crossword puzzles can keep students in the know and encourage critical thinking skills. In addition, another study that applied crossword puzzles to economic learning mentioned that students proved in improving critical thinking skills by linking concepts (Rida et al., 2023). From these findings, it can be seen that crossword puzzles build critical thinking in all learning materials.

By applying these activities, it can be associated with active learning theory, which is that students learn enthusiastically when they go down to the field directly or direct practice so that they will get the desired learning experience (Utami et al., 2022). Compared to applying conventional methods that are quite passive, solving puzzles can make students gain many benefits, one of which is that they will get the main components of critical thinking (Shohib, 2024). While they work on the puzzles, students go into an actively process of examining and adapting their thoughts according to the clues provided, thus helping to keep their thinking skills sharp (Maskanah et al., 2023).

It is crucial to recognize that not necessarily all crossword-based activities are similarly successful in encouraging critical thinking (Asrul et al., 2022). The connectivity of a crossword puzzles relies on how well a crossword puzzle is planned and organized. If the clues are too easy or do not match lesson goals, students may rely on guessing instead of thinking deeply. In addition, clues that are particularly difficult or ambiguous may discourage student engagement or simply make them feeling totally overwhelmed. Hence, teachers should make the crossword puzzles that are challenging yet comprehensible to ensure that students remain sufficiently motivated and involved.

To reinforce this idea, a research report highlighted the significance of incorporating crossword puzzles with digital tools and guidance structures, primarily for younger students. Their showed study that employing ICT based crosswords together with innovative interactive platforms can boost student involvement and provide more customized instruction (Suciningrum & Slamet, 2020). This incorporation not only enhances the learning progress but also reinforces critical thinking by challenging and offering immediate response. This suggests that although crossword puzzles themselves are helpful, their utility can be increased trough the thoughtful identification of technologies. In this study, students finished the puzzles independently, but the they described how they dealt with challenging clues during an interview. Many of them shared how they used previous knowledge, elimination of incorrect options, and working with doubt, all core critical thinking skills that are beneficial in a wide range of academic fields.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

This research examines how contextualized crossword puzzles can be utilized as a leaning medium to build students' slang acquisition and critical thinking skills in a gamification activity. By incorporating survey results and in-depth interviews, this research proposes a closer insight into how crossword-based tasks can assist in building students' language and thinking skills in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Basically, the students realized that crossword puzzles as a learning medium was fun and made them more active and enthusiastic in solving them. Unlike the traditional method which is only bound to

formal grammar, crossword provides an innovative and creative approach. Some of them shared that this activity made them confident in mentioning slang words that they never knew before. This shows that gamified approaches such as crossword puzzles can be beneficial for English language learners, especially in informal language contexts.

It is evident that the application of crossword puzzles as a new variation in learning media greatly encourages students to increase vocabulary in slang. These puzzles introduce new words in a clear context, making it easy and quick for students to learn and apply them appropriately. The clues provided help students to consider the answers and apply them correctly. This media builds more purposeful learning and provides long term memory images. In complement to vocabulary acquisition, these puzzles also encourage the advancement of students' critical thinking skills. To complete the puzzle, students should interact with clues, thinking about various significances, discovering the logical connections among the words, and picking the correctly answer through logical reasoning. This thought process is part of higher-level thinking and is crucial for critical thinking. Student are effectively engaged in building meaning, processing clues, and resolving the problem.

Many of these students are reported to have felt challenging mentally when solving puzzles, specifically when they found clues that were challenging or unknown. However, they view these struggles as a chance to develop, rather than an impediment. This indicates that crossword puzzles can actually help build students' endurance, creativeness, and self-awareness, which are crucial properties for everyday academic and problem-solving success. The research also points to the importance of well-designed crossword activities. To be successful, the puzzle must match the learning objectives, have an acceptable level of difficulty, and come with clear instructions. The slang terms employed should be appropriate and relevant to the language level of the students. Unless proper support is provided, students may get distracted or lose interest.

Lastly, the learning effects of crossword puzzles can be enhanced by incorporating them with other methods, such as group discussions, peer collaboration, or digital tools. These enhancements can create a more engaging and enriching learning experience. In conclusion, this study demonstrates that contextualized crosswords provide a purposeful and inspiring way to promote slang and encourage critical thinking in the EFL classroom. These crosswords stimulate students to deep thinking, problem-solving, and more passively engaging with language. Educators are strongly encouraged to explore adopting and adapting this medium to encourage more student-centered learning environments and real-world learning opportunities.

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