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Using Crossword Puzzles to Teach Arabic Vocabulary to Grade 10 Students at MA Rahmatullah Tulungagung

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Abstract

Vocabulary underpins listening, speaking, reading, and writing in Arabic. Heavy reliance on memorisation and translation can reduce student engagement. This study examined how crossword puzzles were used in Arabic vocabulary instruction and how 30 Grade 10 students at MA Rahmatullah Tulungagung responded to the activity. The study used a descriptive qualitative design. Data were collected through observations, interviews, and document review and analysed through data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. The activity involved planning, classroom implementation, and evaluation. Students used across and down clues based on the target vocabulary and checked their answers against intersecting letters. During the activity, students appeared more enthusiastic, actively sought answers, and consulted classmates. The evidence also indicated that students found the activity enjoyable and felt it helped them recall previously learned words. The findings suggest that crosswords can add variety to Arabic vocabulary instruction and provide opportunities for reinforcement. The study did not include pre- and post-tests or a comparison group, so it cannot establish whether crossword use improved vocabulary knowledge.

Keywords: crossword puzzles; instructional materials; vocabulary learning; Arabic

A. Introduction

Vocabulary (*mufradat*) is a basic component of learning Arabic. Knowing a word involves recognising its form, understanding and recalling its meaning, and using it appropriately in context. A limited vocabulary can make it difficult for students to understand texts, follow conversations, and express ideas in Arabic. Vocabulary instruction should therefore give students regular opportunities to recognise, recall, and use the words they are learning.

Research on Arabic language teaching has considered both the instructional media teachers use (Faizin, 2023) and the activities through which students engage with lesson content, such as discovery learning in virtual instruction (Faizin & Akmalia, 2021). In vocabulary teaching specifically, Faizin (2020) describes how the traditional word game *ABC 5 Dasar* prompts students to recall Arabic words during play. Crossword puzzles similarly give students opportunities to recall words. Students read clues, think of possible answers, check whether the words fit the available squares, and use intersecting letters to verify their choices. Merkel (2016) explains how carefully written clues can help learners recognise and recall vocabulary.

Previous research has examined the use of crossword puzzles to develop Arabic vocabulary knowledge (Khaira, 2021; Wiwaha et al., 2024), including their use with university students (Ritonga & Desrani, 2024). In an elementary-school study, Ardiansah and Hikmah (2025) reported that crossword activities encouraged participation and supported students' retention and understanding of Arabic words. Torres et al. (2022) found that students regarded crossword puzzles as enjoyable, although their effects on learning outcomes may vary across settings. In Arabic language education, learner interest has also been examined as an aspect of students' classroom experience (Munawaroh & Faizin, 2025). These studies provide a rationale for considering how students respond to crossword activities alongside how the activities are used to practise vocabulary.

Crossword puzzles can also serve as formative assessment tools. Nafi'ah et al. (2021) examined their use in assessing receptive Arabic vocabulary, while Nuzula (2024) reported improved learning outcomes after introducing crosswords created with Puzzle Maker in an Arabic vocabulary class. These studies illustrate how crosswords can be used for both practice and assessment. The present study considers how these functions are incorporated into classroom instruction, from planning the activity to evaluating students' work.

In Grade 10 at MA Rahmatullah Tulungagung, some students struggled to recall and understand Arabic words they had been taught. Preliminary observations indicated that the range of teaching materials was limited. Crossword puzzles were selected to give students opportunities to practise recalling familiar words while solving clues and checking possible answers.

B. Research Methodology

The study used a descriptive qualitative design. It was conducted at MA Rahmatullah Tulungagung from 6 to 10 August 2025 and involved 30 Grade 10 students. Data were collected through observations, interviews, and document review.

Classroom observations focused on student engagement, participation, and interaction during the crossword activity. Interviews explored how the teacher and students responded to the use of crosswords in vocabulary instruction. The documents reviewed included lesson materials, completed crossword worksheets, and other supporting records.

Analysis proceeded in three stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. The researcher compared and combined evidence from observations, interviews, and documents to describe how the activity was implemented, what students did, and how they responded. As the study included neither pre- and post-testing nor a comparison group, the analysis focused on describing classroom processes and observed patterns.

C. Results and Discussion

Use of Crossword Puzzles in Vocabulary Instruction

Evidence from observations, interviews, and documents indicated that the crossword activity was carried out in three stages: planning, implementation, and evaluation. The puzzles were introduced to diversify vocabulary practice and involve students in actively retrieving and checking words they had learned.

Planning

During planning, the researcher prepared the lesson materials, selected vocabulary appropriate for Grade 10, and developed the crossword worksheet. Across and down clues drew on words students had already encountered. The words were selected to support the objectives of the lesson.

The researcher also wrote clues that would help students connect word forms with their meanings. Vocabulary clues can use a definition, a brief description, or a context in which the word is used. This approach is consistent with Merkel's (2016, pp. 898–920) argument that crosswords work better as learning tasks when their content and clues are tailored to learners' needs.

Planning therefore determined how well the puzzle fit the lesson content. A puzzle that is too easy offers little challenge, while difficult clues may leave students waiting for help. Both word choice and clue difficulty need to match students' proficiency.

Implementation

The lesson began with a warm-up to reactivate previously learned vocabulary. The teacher then presented the lesson material and distributed the crossword worksheet. Students filled in the grid using the across and down clues. Some worked independently, while others consulted a classmate sitting next to them when they encountered difficulty.

As students worked, they shifted from receiving information to solving a series of simple problems. They read each clue, considered possible answers, matched the word length to the number of squares, and checked their choices against the intersecting letters. This process gave them a chance to retrieve previously learned words. Ardiansah and Hikmah (2025, pp. 1–9) likewise found that structured crossword tasks can support participation, retention, and understanding of vocabulary in context. At MA Rahmatullah, the clearest change was greater engagement as students searched for, selected, and checked answers.

After the students finished, the class reviewed the answers together. The teacher corrected errors and provided further explanations for words that students still found difficult. The follow-up discussion made the crossword part of a practice sequence aimed at reinforcing vocabulary knowledge.



Figure 1. Completed Arabic vocabulary crossword.

Across clues and answers	Down clues and answers
1. العمل ليقضي وقت الفراغ في المخيم — تخييم	1. العمل للراحة من التعب — ترويح
3. العمل الذي يعمل في الماء — سباحة	2. الأشياء التي نلبسها — ملابس
5. المكان المرتفع — جبل	4. من أطعمة الأطفال — حلوى
6. ضدّ بارد — حار	7. ضدّ ذهب — رجع
8. أعضاء الجسم للنظر — عين	

Evaluation

The teacher evaluated students' work by checking their completed puzzles and asking follow-up questions about the words covered in the lesson. The teacher also reviewed words that students still found difficult. Evaluation addressed both answer accuracy and students' ability to recognise word forms and meanings again.

Nafi'ah et al. (2021, pp. 301–317) support the use of crosswords as a formative assessment instrument for receptive Arabic vocabulary. They also emphasise the importance of validity, reliability, objectivity, practicality, and cost when determining whether an instrument is suitable.

In this study, evaluation was part of the classroom learning process. Students' responses helped identify which words they knew and which needed further practice. Changes in proficiency were not estimated statistically because the study did not include pre- and post-tests.

Student Responses to Crossword Puzzles

Observations and interviews revealed four patterns in student responses: greater interest in the activity, active participation and interaction while solving the puzzle, easier recall of previously learned words, and a more enjoyable classroom atmosphere. These patterns describe students' responses and experiences and do not establish a causal improvement in proficiency.

Interest and Motivation

Students' interest was evident in how they approached the task. When the vocabulary was presented as a puzzle, they had an immediate goal. The challenge encouraged them to attempt answers, and getting one answer right provided letters that helped them solve subsequent clues. Students thus had a more active task than repeatedly memorising a list of words.

This pattern is consistent with Ardiansah and Hikmah's (2025, pp. 1–9) finding that crosswords can increase engagement in Arabic vocabulary learning. In a quasi-experimental study, Khaira (2021, pp. 55–62) also

reported that using puzzles as instructional materials improved Arabic vocabulary skills.

The teacher reported that students appeared more interested when Arabic words were presented as a puzzle. Students found the activity more enjoyable because it challenged them to work out each answer. These accounts suggest that a game element can draw attention when the task remains tied to a learning objective.

Participation and Interaction

Participation was evident in how students looked for alternative answers and discussed their choices, as well as in how many completed the task. When a proposed answer did not fit the intersecting letters, students had to reconsider which words might work. This gave them a way to check their answers independently before asking the teacher.

Some students discussed their answers with classmates to check them. The puzzle gave them a problem to solve using the clues: they had to recall words, compare alternatives, and see which ones fit the grid. Wiwaha et al. (2024, pp. 123–136) similarly used crosswords to improve Arabic vocabulary learning outcomes and presented them as a way to make lessons more active.

Vocabulary Recall and Understanding

Students' ease of recall may reflect repeated encounters with the same vocabulary across different activities. Students first encountered the words through explanations and examples and then returned to them through the crossword clues. To answer a clue, students had to retrieve the relevant word form and its meaning.

Torres et al. (2022, pp. 18–29) found that crossword puzzles may be associated with knowledge retention, although outcomes can vary across groups and settings. The present findings suggest that the activity helped students retrieve vocabulary they had already learned. The study did not experimentally test changes in retention.

In an experimental study of university students learning Arabic, Ritonga and Desrani (2024, pp. 71–88) reported a significant effect of crossword use on vocabulary learning. Khaira (2021, pp. 55–62) also reported that puzzles improved Arabic vocabulary skills. These studies provide context for the findings, although differences in research design limit the extent to which their results can be generalised to Grade 10 at MA Rahmatullah.

A More Enjoyable Classroom Atmosphere

The classroom atmosphere became more enjoyable in part because students could work through the challenge in stages. As the grid filled up, students could see their progress and use the intersecting letters as immediate feedback on their answers.

Torres et al. (2022, pp. 18–29) similarly reported that students saw crosswords as an enjoyable, creative, and innovative learning task. Ardiansah and Hikmah (2025, pp. 1–9) found that crosswords could make vocabulary learning more interactive and contextualised. In the present study, the game format provided a way to practise and reinforce the target words.

Synthesis of Findings and Contribution of the Study

Like previous research, this study found positive responses to crossword use. Its focus was on how the activity was implemented at an Islamic senior secondary school. Ardiansah and Hikmah (2025, pp. 1–9) examined crosswords in elementary-school vocabulary instruction and reported positive patterns in participation, retention, and contextual understanding. Ritonga and Desrani (2024, pp. 71–88) used a quantitative experimental design and found a significant effect on university students' vocabulary learning.

The present study contributes a description of the steps involved in using crosswords to reinforce Arabic vocabulary. Words are selected to match lesson content, clues guide students towards possible answers, students find and check their answers, and the teacher reinforces the vocabulary through discussion and evaluation.

The findings also suggest that the puzzles should be adapted to students' needs. Difficult clues can make students dependent on classmates or the teacher, while obvious clues reduce the challenge. Teachers can support purposeful practice by selecting relevant words, adjusting difficulty, allowing enough time, and reviewing answers after the task.

The study was limited by its descriptive qualitative design and its scope of 30 students in one class. Without a comparison group or pre- and post-tests, the study cannot establish whether crosswords caused an improvement in vocabulary knowledge. Future classroom action research, experimental research, or mixed-methods studies could measure changes in vocabulary knowledge and explain how learning occurs during the activity.

D. Conclusion

Crossword puzzles were used in Arabic vocabulary instruction with 30 Grade 10 students at MA Rahmatullah Tulungagung in three stages: planning, implementation, and evaluation. During planning, the researcher chose target words and prepared a worksheet that matched the lesson content. During implementation, students solved across and down clues independently or in discussion with classmates. The class then reviewed the answers, and the teacher reinforced words that students still found difficult. Evaluation consisted of checking the answers and asking follow-up questions about the target vocabulary.

Students responded positively to the activity. They showed enthusiasm, worked actively, interacted with classmates, and used the puzzle to recall words they had previously learned. Crosswords can add variety to Arabic vocabulary instruction and provide opportunities to reinforce learning.

The design did not include pre- and post-tests or a comparison group, so the findings cannot establish statistical or causal effectiveness. Quantitative studies, classroom action research, or mixed-methods studies could assess changes in vocabulary knowledge more directly.

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