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Teaching the German Verb to First-Year Students (A1–B1): From the Grammar Rule to the Communicative Task and Gamification

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Abstract

Mastering the verb system is one of the main difficulties faced by Romanian first-year students of German, whose problems are not limited to memorising verb forms but extend to using them in communicative contexts. The present paper examines the weekly course "The Verb in German", taught in the second semester of the first year to heterogeneous groups of beginners (A1) and more advanced learners (B1), and pursues three aims: to ground the teaching approach in research on focus on form, task-based learning, acquisition sequences and retrieval practice; to analyse the final grades of the 1,242 students enrolled between 2017 and 2026, together with end-of-semester student feedback; and to derive from these data a model for integrating gamification into the course. A retrospective descriptive design is adopted, combining the quantitative analysis of grade registers with qualitative feedback. The results show that grades differ significantly between years without following a linear trend, that absence from the examination decreased from 24.1% of enrolled students in 2017–2022 to 10.1% in 2023–2026, and that 2026 recorded the weakest results of the series (mean 6.85). Approximately 90% of the students rate the weekly revision of irregular verbs and the in-class exercises as very useful. The recurrent areas of difficulty (irregular verbs, separable verbs, verb position, choice of tense) correspond to critical points in the acquisition sequences documented for German. The novel elements of the approach are the two-channel presentation (slides in German, oral explanation in Romanian) as a response to group heterogeneity, the cumulative weekly retrieval of irregular verbs, the alignment of the course units with acquisition sequences, and a gamification model in which every game is tied to a linguistic task and accompanied by explicit safeguards against the risks reported in the literature. As the data do not derive from an experimental design, they do not allow causal attribution, and the proposed model remains to be tested empirically.

Keywords: *German verb; focus on form; task-based learning; retrieval practice; gamification; German as a foreign language*

1. Introduction

For Romanian students learning German, the verb is the centre around which the clause is organised and, at the same time, one of the most persistent obstacles. The difficulty is not limited to memorising forms: learners have to choose the correct auxiliary in the perfect, separate the prefix and place it at the end of the clause, put the finite verb in second position in the main clause and in final position in the subordinate clause, and switch from the indicative to the Konjunktiv (rendered in Romanian grammar by the conditional and the subjunctive) or from the active to the passive. The experience of many teachers of German is summarised by Diehl and Boss: as soon as learners' attention shifts from form to meaning, grammar practice appears to have been "für die Katz" [1, p. 131].

The present paper is based on the weekly course "The Verb in German" ("Verbul în limba germană"), taught to first-year students in the second semester, in groups in which beginners (A1) and more advanced learners (B1) coexist. The course was not designed as an intervention study; the data examined here were collected in the ordinary running of the course and are analysed retrospectively. Accordingly, the study addresses three research questions: (RQ1) How can the teaching approach be grounded in the specialist literature on focus on form, task-based learning, acquisition sequences and retrieval practice? (RQ2) What do the final grades obtained over ten academic years (2017–2026) and the students' feedback indicate? (RQ3) How can gamification be integrated into the course on the basis of these data, so as to exploit its benefits and limit its documented risks? The paper is organised as follows: Section 2 sets out the theoretical framework, Section 3 describes the method, Section 4 presents the results, Section 5 discusses them and proposes the gamification model, and Section 6 draws the conclusions.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Focus On Form And Task-Based Learning

Long distinguishes between teaching organised around preselected forms (*focus on forms*), in which the grammatical structure is the unit of work, and *focus on form*, in which learners' attention is drawn to linguistic elements as they arise in lessons whose overriding focus is on meaning or communication [2]. Ellis describes the task-based lesson in three phases (pre-task, during-task and post-task) and stresses that only the during-task phase is obligatory [3, pp. 19–20]. The defining characteristic of a task is the primary focus on message [3, p. 35]; the post-task phase may include a repeat performance [3, p. 36], and attention to form can occur in any of the phases [3, p. 38]. In the didactics of German as a foreign language, Malloggi argues in the same direction for grammar teaching built on learner-centred, autonomy-promoting and action-oriented tasks, in which the communicative function of grammatical structures takes precedence [4, pp. 5–6]; among the techniques of awareness-raising, he also lists the explanation of the rule in the learners' mother tongue [4, p. 18]. For a course devoted to the verb, the consequence is that the communicative task does not replace form-focused practice but provides it with a context in which the verb form becomes necessary for achieving an outcome. Fandrych and Thurmair, in turn, devote separate chapters to the verb and to the verbal bracket with its topological fields, the latter accompanied by a didactic discussion of word order as a learning problem [5].

2.2 Acquisition Sequences in German Verb Morphology and Word Order

The DiGS project ("Deutsch in Genfer Schulen") is particularly relevant for German. On the basis of 1,800 texts written by 220 French-speaking pupils [1, p. 133], the researchers described learning phases for verbal morphology, case and word order, six of them for verbal inflection [6, pp. 12–20]. For verbal morphology the phases are: pre-conjugation; the present tense of regular verbs; the present tense of irregular verbs and modal verb + infinitive; auxiliary + past participle; the preterite; all other forms (future, passive, Konjunktiv). For word order, the sequence is: subject–verb main clause; coordinate main clauses and questions; verb separation; the subordinate clause; inversion [1, p. 135]. Verb morphology was acquired more or less in the order in which it had been introduced in the classroom, whereas inversion was acquired much later than it had been taught [1, p. 136]. The authors conclude that individual phases cannot be skipped and that explanations are helpful when learners have reached the corresponding phase [1, p. 140]. As regards irregular forms, Wagner shows that, when English-speaking learners of German formed the preterite of invented verbs, fewer than half of their responses followed the regular pattern, many showing vowel alternations modelled on existing strong verbs [7, p. 543], a result that supports the notion of an analogical pattern associator [7, p. 549]; memorising model verbs grouped by ablaut series thus becomes a resource for forming new verbs.

2.3 Retrieval Practice, Interleaving and Corrective Feedback

Karpicke and Roediger showed that, once an item had been recalled, repeated study no longer produced any measurable learning, whereas repeated retrieval generated large benefits for retention one week later [8, pp. 967–968]; at the same time, students did not predict that repeated retrieval would improve their recall [8, p. 968]. More recent research extends these findings to foreign-language grammar. Pan and colleagues found that mixing verb tenses during practice (interleaving) led to better conjugation on the delayed test, even though blocked practice produced better scores during practice itself [9, p. 11], and they describe interleaving as a robust and broadly applicable strategy for grammar learning [9, p. 12]. For German specifically, Keppenne, Hopman and Jackson compared production-based and comprehension-based training among first-semester university learners [10, pp. 913–914]; the production-based group achieved more accurate gender agreement in written production [10, p. 923], which the authors attribute to the retrieval of forms and the comparison of one's own output with feedback [10, pp. 925–926]. As regards correction, Lyster and Ranta distinguish six types of corrective feedback [11, p. 46]; the teacher's correct reformulation (*recast*) is the most frequent type but the least likely to lead to uptake, whereas elicitation, metalinguistic feedback, clarification requests and repetition allow for negotiation of form and self-correction [11, p. 56]. Diehl and Boss add a developmental criterion: errors lying beyond the learner's current acquisitional phase are not worth correcting, as correction would be fruitless [1, p. 140].

2.4 Gamification: Definition, Evidence and Risks

Gamification is defined as the use of game design elements in non-game contexts [12, p. 77]; it does not replace the course with a game, but borrows certain game elements (rules, levels, points, challenges, immediate feedback). Sailer and Homner report small but significant effects on cognitive, motivational and behavioural learning outcomes [12, p. 92]. In a systematic review of forty empirical studies on foreign-language instruction, Zhang and Hasim find benefits for language skills and positive effects on learners' attitudes and emotional responses, the most frequent elements being feedback, points, quizzes and badges [13, p. 7]. For German as a foreign language the evidence remains small-scale: an educational trail created with the Actionbound app was tested with 15 students of German at the University of Zadar, 86.7% of whom would like to take part in such interactive activities more often [14, p. 135]; and Roche and EL-Bouz observe a motivational effect of grammar animations based on sports metaphors [15]. The literature also documents real risks. Technical problems, anxiety in competitive settings and leaderboards that discourage some learners are reported among the drawbacks, together with the possibility that the positive effect is short-lived. In a 14-week longitudinal study, Rodrigues and colleagues found that the effect of gamification decreased after about four weeks and then increased again without any intervention, a pattern they call the familiarisation effect [16, p. 15]. Finally, expected tangible rewards significantly undermine intrinsic motivation [17, p. 640], whereas positive feedback enhances it.

3. Method

3.1 Research Design

The study adopts a retrospective, descriptive design with two components: a quantitative analysis of the final grades recorded in the course registers and a qualitative analysis of the feedback given by students at the end of each semester. The design is not experimental: there is no control group, and the teaching approach was not introduced at a definite point in time. The results are therefore interpreted as indicators of the context in which the approach operates, not as evidence of its effect.

3.2 Participants

The participants are the first-year students enrolled in the course "The Verb in German" at Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iași in the academic years ending in 2017–2026: 1,242 enrolled students, of whom 1,002 sat the examination and 240 were absent. The groups are heterogeneous: some students begin German at level A1, while others already have B1-level knowledge or above. The number of enrolled students fell from 161 (2017) to 69 (2026). The data were processed anonymously and reported only in aggregate form.

3.3 Teaching Context And Materials

The course takes place weekly in the second semester. To meet the needs of both categories of students, slides in German (the rule, the paradigms, the examples) are projected on the interactive whiteboard, while the oral explanation is given in Romanian; beginners thus understand the grammatical mechanism, and all students write down correct examples in the target language. Each thematic unit (the present tense with irregularities, the preterite, the perfect, the pluperfect, verbs with separable and inseparable particles, reflexive verbs, verb government, Konjunktiv I and II, the passive, infinitive constructions) is followed by exercises on the aspect taught. The constant component of the course is the work with irregular verbs: each week students receive five verbs, for which they must know the present-tense conjugation and the principal parts (infinitive, preterite, past participle with the auxiliary haben/sein); at the end of the following class these verbs are revised, and those of the previous weeks return every week. In this way, students learn 70 frequently used irregular verbs in 14 weeks. The order of the thematic units broadly follows the DiGS phases for verbal morphology (Table 1).

Table 1. Correspondence between the DiGS acquisition phases and the course units. Source: author's elaboration; phases after [1, p. 135].

DiGS phase (verbal morphology)	Units of the course "The Verb in German"
II–III. Present tense of regular and irregular verbs; modal verb + infinitive	Present tense with irregularities; verbs with separable and inseparable particles; reflexive verbs; verb government

IV. Auxiliary + past participle	Perfect; pluperfect
V. Preterite	Preterite
VI. All other forms (future, passive, Konjunktiv)	Konjunktiv I and II; passive; infinitive constructions

3.4 Instruments and Data Analysis

The quantitative instrument consists of the final-grade registers of the course (scale 1–10, pass mark 5). Each student listed under the table heading was counted as enrolled; a student was considered absent when the cell was empty or contained "-", "0" or "abs". For each year, the number of enrolled and present students, the mean grade, the proportion of grades below 5 and of grades 9–10 (relative to students present) and the proportion of absences (relative to enrolled students) were calculated; the means were computed from the distribution of grades by year. Differences between years and between three periods (2017–2019, 2020–2022, 2023–2026) were tested for statistical significance, with a Bonferroni correction for comparisons between consecutive years. The qualitative instrument is the feedback collected from students at the end of each semester, which was not processed statistically.

4. Results

4.1 Grades And Examination Attendance

Table 2 summarises the annual indicators.

Table 2. Annual indicators for the course "The Verb in German", 2017–2026. Source: grade registers of the course, author's processing.

Year	Enrolled	Present	Mean	Grades below 5 (% of present)	Grades 9–10 (% of present)	Absent (% of enrolled)
2017	161	115	8.67	0.0	56.5	28.6
2018	157	124	7.60	8.1	43.5	21.0
2019	140	104	7.43	16.3	50.0	25.7
2020	122	91	8.47	2.2	58.2	25.4
2021	103	80	8.25	0.0	47.5	22.3
2022	133	105	8.45	3.8	60.0	21.1
2023	147	128	7.77	11.7	46.9	12.9
2024	121	113	7.95	8.0	45.1	6.6
2025	89	82	8.07	7.3	51.2	7.9
2026	69	60	6.85	13.3	31.7	13.0
Total	1,242	1,002	7.98	7.1	49.6	19.3

Grades differ significantly between years but do not follow a linear trend: neither the annual mean nor the proportion of grades below 5 rises or falls systematically. In every year from 2017 to 2025, grades 9–10 form the largest group (43.5–60.0% of students present). After the Bonferroni correction, only the change from 2025 to 2026 remains significant among the consecutive-year comparisons for 2017–2026. The year 2026 has the weakest results: a mean of 6.85, 31.7% grades 9–10 and 8.3% grades of 10; its difference from 2023–2025 taken together is significant. By period, the mean is 7.91 in 2017–2019, 8.40 in 2020–2022 and 7.74 in 2023–2026, and the proportion of grades below 5 is 7.9%, 2.2% and 9.9%, respectively. The clearest change concerns attendance: in 2017–2022, between 21% and 29% of enrolled students were absent each year (24.1% cumulatively), whereas in 2023–2026 only 7–13% were (10.1% cumulatively), a significant difference. The grade 10 is very frequent in 2019, 2020 and 2022–2024 (29–43% of students present), and 2019 is a polarised year, with 30.8% grades of 10 and 16.3% grades below 5.

4.2 Recurrent Areas of Difficulty

Classroom observation over the period examined indicates the same areas of difficulty from year to year: irregular verbs, verbs with separable prefixes, modal verbs, the position of the verb in the clause and the choice of tense. Errors in the formation of the past participle frequently show weak verbs inflected on the model of strong verbs. These observations were not collected through a systematic error-analysis instrument.

4.3 Student Feedback

According to the feedback given at the end of each semester, approximately 90% of the students rate the weekly revision of irregular verbs and the exercises done in every class as very useful; the remaining 10% make no reference to these components.

5. Discussion

5.1 Interpreting the Results

The decrease in absences after 2023 suggests a plausible hypothesis, which the data cannot confirm: some of the students who in previous years would not have sat the examination now take part in the assessment, which would partly explain the higher proportion of grades below 5 after 2023. The very high frequency of the grade 10 in several years reduces the discriminating power of the assessment, and the lower results of 2026 require a separate analysis. Final grades do not measure the effect of a method, since the data do not come from a design with a control group and the variations cannot be attributed causally.

The areas of difficulty reported in Section 4.2 broadly coincide with critical points in the DiGS sequences: the transition from the regular to the irregular present, the auxiliary + participle construction, verb separation and the subordinate clause. Verb position remains difficult well beyond the beginner stage: among advanced Polish university students of German, inversion and verb-final placement in subordinate clauses proved the hardest in oral production, whereas the verbal bracket was produced correctly in 99% of cases [18, p. 94]. The participle errors observed correspond to the tendency, documented in DiGS, to overgeneralise the strong-verb paradigm, possibly as an effect of intensive classroom training. Two didactic consequences follow: the practice of irregular verbs must be accompanied by explicit contrasts between weak and strong verbs, and errors must be interpreted according to the phase the learner has reached [1, p. 140].

The positive perception of the weekly revision is noteworthy in the light of the finding that students do not anticipate the benefits of repeated retrieval [8, p. 968]: the predictable routine of revision, built into every class, appears to make its effect visible to them. The cumulative return of the verbs from previous weeks also brings the routine close to the interleaved practice found to be beneficial for conjugation [9, pp. 11–12].

5.2 A Proposed Model for Integrating Gamification

The gamification model is placed here because it is derived from the results above: it builds on the routine that students value (the retrieval of irregular verbs), on the progression of units in Table 1 and on the risks documented in Section 2.4. A game that ends with a verifiable communicative outcome (a solution, a reconstruction, a decision) keeps the primary focus on message, the defining characteristic of a task [3, p. 35], while the verb form becomes the condition for achieving that outcome, that is, a focus on form in Long's sense. The model, which preserves the current structure of the course and is yet to be tested, has six components. (1) The revision of the five irregular verbs becomes a timed retrieval round in mixed teams of beginners and advanced students; the score belongs to the team, and no individual ranking is displayed, given the anxiety that competition and leaderboards can cause [13, p. 6]. (2) The semester is structured as a succession of "levels" corresponding to the units in Table 1; moving on to the next level requires completing a communicative task, not merely a conjugation exercise (e.g., reconstructing the course of a day for the perfect, negotiating solutions to a hypothetical situation for Konjunktiv II, describing a process for the passive). (3) Points are awarded both for the outcome of the task and for the correctness of the target form. (4) Correction during the game relies on elicitation and metalinguistic feedback, which lead to self-correction. (5) The game mechanics change from one unit to the next to limit the decline documented after the first weeks, and game scores do not count towards the final grade, so that they do not become an expected tangible reward [17, p. 640]; positive verbal feedback is used systematically instead. (6) The post-game phase revisits the rule explicitly, with the slide in German and the explanation in Romanian.

5.3 Novel Elements and Limitations

The approach brings four novel elements: the two-channel presentation (slide in German, oral explanation in Romanian) as a response to the heterogeneity of first-year groups; the weekly and cumulative retrieval of irregular verbs, integrated into every class and grounded in research on retrieval and interleaved practice; the alignment of the course units with the DiGS acquisition sequences, which provides a criterion for interpreting errors; and a gamification model that links each game to a linguistic task and includes explicit safeguards against the documented risks. The main limitations are the retrospective, non-experimental design, the use of final grades as the only quantitative indicator, the non-standardised collection of student feedback and the absence of a systematic error analysis.

6. Conclusions

Teaching the German verb in the first year requires a balance between grammatical accuracy and communicative fluency. The literature on focus on form and task-based learning supports the combination of explicit explanation with tasks in which the verb form becomes necessary, and the DiGS research shows that, for verb morphology, the order of teaching and the order of acquisition largely coincide. The ten-year data show no linear trend in grades, but a clear increase in examination attendance after 2023 and weaker results in 2026, which call for further analysis. Students value the revision of irregular verbs and the exercises, and gamification, used in moderation and tied to linguistic tasks, can consolidate this routine. The next steps are testing the proposed model in a design with a comparison group, administering an anonymous standardised questionnaire at the end of the semester and carrying out a systematic error analysis on a corpus of student papers.

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