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Research article

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Abstract

This study assesses the efficiency of a 14-week project-based writing skills course that teaches 178 irregular German verbs. At the start of the semester, students were given a list of irregular verbs, and pre-and post-tests were used to measure their comprehension. The course required students to explain and apply verb meanings and forms through projects in narrative, poetry, and theater genres. A t-test analysis of the results revealed a considerable improvement in the learner's knowledge of irregular verbs. The integration of project-based writing courses into areas other than writing is encouraged by these findings.

Keywords: German as a Foreign Language, irregular verbs, writing skills, project-based

1. Introduction

Language acquisition typically begins in early childhood when children start communicating with those around them, including their parents. The primary language learned at this stage, also known as the mother tongue or L1 is acquired through creative attempts to apply observed rules and repetition of frequently heard phrases (Littlewood, 1984). Clark (2016) states that from the moment of their birth, children are immersed in a linguistic environment where they are constantly surrounded by individuals who possess a wealth of knowledge in language. These experienced speakers provide insightful criticism and participate in various engaging activities, giving kids plenty of chances to improve their language abilities. Children gradually grasp the language that pervades their environment through ongoing dialogues and cooperative activities. Many people can learn a second or even third language through formal schooling in addition to their first language. For instance, German is a popular third language choice at Anatolian High Schools in Turkey, where English is frequently taught as a second language.

One of the crucial abilities in acquiring a second language, according to researchers (e.g., Hyland, 2003; Kroll, 2001; Matsuda, 2012; Silva & Matsuda, 2002; Schoonen, 2019), is writing. Foreign language writing has gained popularity and has become a must for communication with the global community (Shukri, 2014). Thanks to contemporary internet technology, this tendency has grown and increased (Rahimi & Rezai, 2023). According to Boonpattanaporn (2008) and Grabe & Kaplan (1996), writing is a crucial academic talent that must be honed in order to excel in school and in the future. Therefore, foreign language students are attempting to explore chances to develop their writing abilities (Wonglakorn & Deerajviset, 2023).

The process of acquiring and mastering different linguistic elements, such as nouns and verbs, is the basic building block for writing (Garcia-Echeverry & Novozhenina, 2023). Verbs are extremely important in German since without them, no sentence would be possible. As a result, verbs are considered to be "the most significant linguistic unit" and the learning of verb forms is an intriguing field of research in the study of German as a foreign language. (Granzow-



Emden, 2013). Verbs are typically classified into regular and irregular or weak and strong verbs, as well as auxiliary verbs, modal verbs, copula verbs, main verbs, and lexical verbs when describing verbal inflection in grammar. A fundamental distinction exists between the finite and the infinite forms of verbs. The former is characterized by their person and number, mood, tense, and verb gender. This study aimed to teach students the *Präsens* (present), *Präteritum* (past), and *Perfekt* (perfect) forms of verbs, including irregular verbs that differ from standard conjugation, through a project-based course. Pellengahr (2016) comprehensively examines regular and irregular verbs in its German grammar book. Regarding the regularity of verbs, the book provides the following definitions: **Regular Verbs:** Regular verbs follow a specific pattern in their conjugation. They are formed by adding specific suffixes to the word stem by grammatical rules. These verbs are predictable, and their conjugation can be easily learned as they adhere to a specific schema. **Irregular Verbs:** Irregular verbs deviate from grammatical rules and do not have a consistent conjugation form. Their base forms change in different tenses and persons, and their conjugation needs to be memorized. Unlike regular verbs, irregular verbs cannot be conjugated using a fixed pattern.

Despite having significantly fewer irregular verbs compared to German, Mindt, and Grabowski (1995) have stated that knowing and using all irregular verbs in English proficiently is achieved rarely. If we also include prefixed verbs in German, the number of irregular verbs is many times higher compared to English. It is indeed quite challenging to fully learn such a large number of irregular verbs in German. In this study, Students integrated 178 irregular verbs in German into projects such as theater, poetry, and storytelling to facilitate their mastery of irregular verbs.

Project-based work has become a core work norm not only in companies but also in education and has proven to be a successful educational strategy in many areas (Barron, Schwartz, Vye, et al., 1998). The goal of project-based learning (PBL) is to involve students in the exploration of real-world issues through a comprehensive approach to teaching and learning in the classroom. The origins of project-based learning may be traced back more than a century to the writings of philosopher and educator John Dewey (1959), whose experimental school at the University of Chicago was based on the inquiry-based learning model. Dewey believed that if students worked on genuine, meaningful tasks and issues that mirrored what experts do in real-world settings, they would become personally qualified in the subject matter (Krajcik & Blumenfeld, 2005). Active inquiry leads to deeper understanding. Dewey's original idea has been improved and elaborated upon by learning science research over the past years. Recent advancements in the learning sciences have made it possible to gain new knowledge and understanding of how students learn (Bransford et al., 1999).

Erdem (2002) suggests that PBL is a learning approach that views the project as an infrastructure element and involves thinking, imagining, and constructing. A learning approach that is based on thinking, imagining, or constructing aims to foster creative individuals who have taken responsibility for their learning and a learning process that will enable them to achieve this. Bayraktar (2015) explains that the PBL approach aims to find solutions to problems individually or in small groups by simulating natural conditions. Since PBL develops problem-solving skills in students, it is used to achieve objectives at the application, analysis, and synthesis levels. According to Krajcik and Blumenfeld (2005), learners demonstrate deep understanding when they actively generate meaning based on their interactions and experiences in the real world, rather than passively collecting information from a teacher, computer, or book.

This study has contributed to German language teaching by incorporating irregular verbs into the development of the writing skill, which is one of the four fundamental language skills. Writing, which involves putting one's thoughts into words on paper, is essential for effective communication and has diverse practical applications in daily life. As Sever (2004) has stated, writing enables us to record and share our experiences from one generation to the next, thus allowing us to progress scientifically, culturally, and civilisationally. In this regard, writing plays a critical role in helping us understand past societies, cultures, and events. Language is the medium through which we learn about and understand our cultures, and learning a foreign language involves understanding the culture of the society that speaks that language. Writing and writing skills are indispensable tools for this learning process, and writing education holds a significant place in the development of writing skills in foreign language teaching. The activities carried out to improve writing skills in foreign language teaching facilitate learning the target language by enabling students to put their knowledge into practice. Writing practice helps identify missing aspects of learned information and promotes control. Writing skills are instrumental in achieving goals such as creative thinking, developing language skills, and transferring learned information to long-term memory. Hyland (2003) emphasizes that writing education should focus on the practice/introduction, guided writing, controlled writing, and free writing processes, mainly concerning language structure, for the development of writing skills in second language teaching. To improve writing education in foreign language teaching, it is essential to consider factors such as the mother tongue, culture, and characteristics of the target audience, prevent negative transfers, provide guidance throughout the process, offer planned and continuous training, and diversify narratives to improve comprehension (Way et al., 2000). This study has taken these factors into account in the development of writing skills, guided students at every stage of their projects, and provided narrative variety.

1.1. Problem Statement

Against this backdrop, the central research question that this study seeks to address is:

Does project-based writing have a significant effect on the learning of “irregular” verbs in the German L2 classroom?

By the identified problem statement, attempts were made to obtain answers to the following sub-problems.

- Is there a statistically significant difference between the test results obtained from the first session of the project-based German writing skills class, where students wrote the present tense, past tense, and perfect tense forms of irregular verbs, along with their Turkish meanings, and the final test results obtained after 14 weeks of the same practice?
- Has this practice led to an improvement in students' writing skills?
- What were the outcomes of project-based learning on the instructor and students after the 14-week implementation?

1.2. Aim and Importance

This study aims to determine whether the 178 irregular verbs found in German can be effectively taught through project-based writing skills courses and whether this approach can lead to an improvement in students' writing abilities. Upon reviewing the literature, it was found



that no such study has been conducted regarding the improvement of German writing skills and the teaching of irregular verbs. Therefore, it is believed that this study will fill this gap in the literature and make a significant contribution to the field.

2. Method

This study, which aims to teach irregular verbs through a project-based writing course, has been put forward by using the quantitative research method. As the study aimed to measure the change between pre-evaluation and post-evaluation within the same group, a dependent-sample t-test was conducted.

2.1. Study group

Twenty prospective teachers who are currently enrolled in a Turkish state university's German language teaching program made up the research sample for this study. Two students, however, were dropped from the research because they missed the post-test. 18 prospective teachers remained for the study. Since the writing skills course is part of the first year's curriculum of the four-year German teacher education program, the participants were first-year students. Students who have finished one year of preparatory German instruction and are at the B1 level are the participants.

2.2. Data Collection

The German Teaching Department in Turkish universities offers a two-hour per week writing skills course beginning in the first grade, based on the 2018 curriculum. As a result, the dataset for this study consists of the list of irregular verbs that first-graders completed, together with their definitions, basic conjugations, and second and third forms.

The students were given a list of irregular verbs at the first session of the 14-week, 2-hour-per-week German writing skills course. They were instructed to write the conjugation of each verb in the present tense for the 3rd person singular, as well as their 2nd and 3rd forms, and their corresponding Turkish meanings in the designated spaces. It is noteworthy that verbs were conjugated according to the 3rd person singular pronoun as it is considered a standard reference in German dictionaries (see: Langenscheidt, Duden, Wahrig, and Pons) Each correctly filled-in blank was assigned 1 point, with a total of 4 points assigned to each verb. Thus, the 178¹ verbs on the list were evaluated based on a total of 712 points. The students were given 65 minutes to complete the task. The course instructor graded and evaluated the list of irregular verbs filled in by the students, constituting the primary data for the study. The first three irregular verbs on the list are presented as an illustrative example in the table below.

Table 1. An Example from the Data Collection Tool

Verbs (infinitive)	3. Pers. Sg. (Präsens)	3. Pers. Sg. (Präteritum)	3. Pers. Sg. (Perfekt)	Turkish meaning
backen				
befehlen				
beginnen				

Throughout its 14-week length and two hours of teaching per week, the writing skills course systematically taught irregular verbs. The first part of the lesson each week was an introduction and explanation of 10 to 15 irregular verbs, followed by examples of possible sentences in

¹ The irregular verbs in the book by Dreyer and Schmidt (2013) were used as a reference.

which they may be utilized. Each week's second lesson challenged the students to create a project utilizing the irregular verbs they had studied in the initial lesson. The students wrote the projects either individually or in groups, and they did it in a genre of their choosing, such as plays, fables, tales, poetry, or prose. The instructor collected the projects after the class and saved any mistakes in the students' writing until the lesson the following week when she returned the students' improved work. This cycle continued throughout the course's 14 weeks.

The teacher gave the students a second copy of the list of irregular verbs that they had been asked to complete at the beginning of the course. They had 65 minutes to complete the list, after which the course instructor once again assessed and scored it. The second batch of data for the study was produced by this approach.

2.3. Data Analysis

A paired sample t-test was conducted to examine whether there was a statistically significant difference between the initial data and the final data obtained from the samples. The paired t-test is appropriate when the data is in the form of matched pairs (Xu et al., 2017). The data were analyzed and visualized using the R Studio program².

2.4. Ethical Consent of the Research

In this study, all the rules set out in the scope of the "Directive on the Ethics of Scientific Research and Publication in Higher Education Institutions" were adhered to. Participants were informed of the topic and purpose of the study, and their written and verbal consent was obtained, indicating that the data would be used in scientific research.

Ethics committee consent information

Name of the committee that made the ethical evaluation: Necmettin Erbakan University Ethics Commission

Date of ethical evaluation decision: 13.05.2022

As a result of the meeting numbered 198 in the ethics evaluation document, it was decided that "There is no objection to the feasibility of the Research/Project in terms of scientific research ethics".

3. Results

The paired sample t-test was used to analyze whether there was a statistically significant difference between the first data and the final data from the samples. The paired t-test is appropriate when data is in the form of matched pairs (Xu et al., 2017). The analysis and visualization of the data were performed using the R studio program.

The t-test analysis revealed a p-value of 7.168e-10. This result indicates that teaching irregular verbs in the project-based writing course is highly effective for students. Table 2 shows that the confidence interval (CI) is -396.4357 to -276.0906. A 95% CI means that if the study is conducted multiple times (with multiple sampling from the same population) with corresponding 95% CIs for the mean constructed, we expect 95% of these CIs to contain the true population mean (Tan Huey and Tan Beng, 2010). The confidence interval for the

² <https://support--rstudio-com.netlify.app/products/rstudio/download/>



difference in means provides an estimate of the absolute difference in means of the outcome variable of interest between the comparison groups. The mean of the differences was found to be -336.2632, indicating that the research result falls within the 95 percent confidence interval.

Table 2. Paired sample t-test result

n	confidence interval	mean of the differences	df	t	p-value
40	-396.4357 -276.0906	-336.2632	18	-11.741	7.168e-10

The following graphics present the pretest and posttest scores of the students in a concrete manner. The first histogram displays the scores obtained from the first data, whereas the second histogram exhibits the scores from the second data.

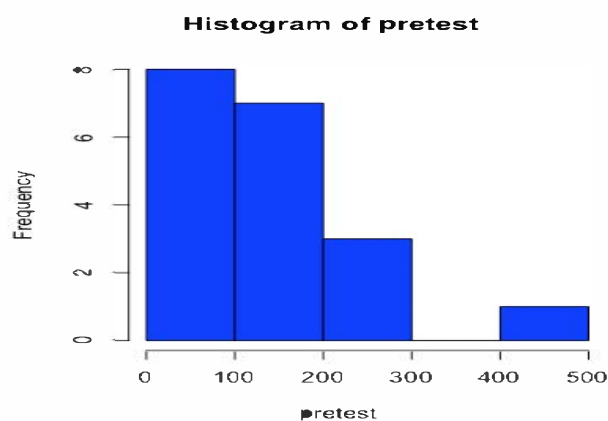


Figure 1. Pretest scores of the participants

As previously mentioned, German has 178 irregular verbs (excluding those with prefixes and suffixes). For the first data, students were required to conjugate each verb in the present tense, as well as provide the second and third forms and their Turkish meanings. However, upon analyzing the histogram that represents the first data, it becomes clear that the students scored quite low, with 8 students receiving scores between 0 and 100, 7 students receiving scores between 100 and 200, and 3 students scoring between 200 and 300. Interestingly, there were no students with scores between 300 and 400, and only one student managed to score between 400 and 500 points.

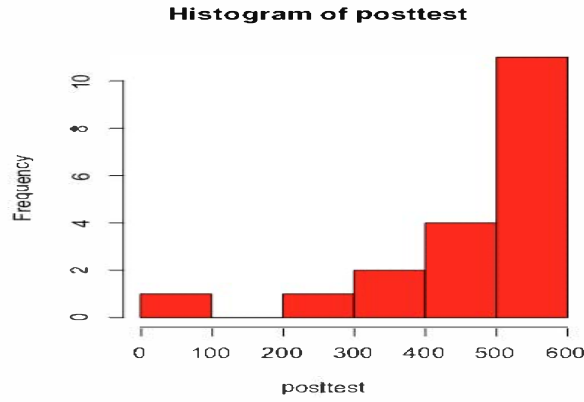


Figure 2. Posttest scores of the participants

After the 14-week German writing course, students were once again requested to conjugate each irregular verb on the list in present tense, followed by the 2nd and 3rd forms and their Turkish equivalents. Consequently, the second set of data was created. Upon examination of the histogram depicting the second dataset, it is evident that students received considerably higher scores when compared to the pretest results. Only one student scored between 0 and 100, and there were no students who scored between 200 and 300. Just one student achieved a score within the range of 200 to 300, while 2 students attained a score between 300 and 400. Additionally, 4 students scored between 400 and 500, while exactly 10 students reached a score between 500 and 600 points.

Another theme that the study focused on was investigating whether the project-based writing skills course contributed to the development of German writing skills. Below are two examples of the writings that the students presented as their projects. The irregular verbs discussed during that week are highlighted in bold.

Die Kleine Schnecke

*Aus dem Ei schlüpfte die kleine Schnecke. Er hat sich umgesehen. Er **hob** den Kopf. Er wurde in einem Wald mit riesigen Bäumen geboren. Er **kroch** ein wenig. Er sah die Blume, die gerade ihre Blätter geöffnet hatte. Er wollte die Blume berühren. Er kletterte auf den Ast neben der Blume. Er **klohm**. Die andere Spitze des Zweiges bog sich zum Boden, und die kleine Schnecke **hing** am Ast. Er **konnte** sich nicht bewegen. Die faule Zikade lungerte herum. Er bemerkte die Schnecke. Er erkannte seine Schwester, Mutter Schnecke. Sie haben ihm **geholfen**. Er kletterte auf die untere Seite des Astes. Die kleine Schnecke **kam** auf ihn zu. Er verlor das Gleichgewicht und stürzte zu*

*Boden. Aber es tat nicht weh. Sein Panzer stützte ihn. Die Zikade **hob** es vom Boden **auf**. Die Mutterschnecke begann, nach ihrem Baby zu suchen. Sie kam an seine Seite. Sie umarmte sie, schimpfte und **kniff** ihn.*

R.Güngör

Meine Lieblingszeiten

*Hier kamen meine Lieblingszeiten des Jahres,
Die Vögel **pfiffen**, und gleichzeitig flogen
Das Wasser **quoll** mit der Begeisterung
Duftende Blumen **mochten gepriesen** werden, aber nicht **gerissen** werden
Meine Liebe zur Natur konnte nicht **gemessen** werden
Ich **rate** allen jetzt, die Zeit im Dorf zu verbringen
Auf dem Land zu **reiten**, indem der Wind ihre Gesichter **reibt**
Den Geruch von der frischen Milch zu atmen, die Oma frisch **gemolken** hat,
Und viele weitere schöne Gefühle, die ich jetzt nicht **nennen** könnte,
Das Traurigste ist, dass diese Zeiten enden **müssen***

F.S.Adibelli

4. Conclusion, Discussion and Recommendations

In this section, we highlight the results reached based on the data collected within the framework of this study and offer recommendations for both this study and potential related future research.

According to the study's findings, students significantly improved on their post-test results, demonstrating remarkable achievement in their learning. The two test scores showed a significant difference, indicating that the project-based learning strategy helped them learn the language more effectively. While working on their projects, the students not only had the chance to utilize irregular verbs in authentic circumstances, but they also improved their writing talents and displayed their capacity for original thought. Çapanoğlu and Sulak (2023) state that writing skills are a skill that is neglected and kept in the background in primary school. They emphasize that in writing teaching, the emphasis is mostly on form features, spelling, and punctuation; thinking processes, idea generation, and students' own writing are neglected. According to Afrilyasanti and Basthomi (2011), students must possess various 21st-century skills to succeed, including creative thinking. One of the areas that use creative thinking the most is creative writing (Göçen, et. al. 2023) In this context, the project-based writing skills course compensates for the neglected aspects by providing the quality that it should be.

It was discovered after a review of the literature that no project-based research had been carried out in the area of teaching German. As a result, it is anticipated that this study will make significant contributions to the area. The findings, however, are consistent in showing that project-based learning (PBL) improves student achievement and motivation when compared with comparable research in other domains. For instance, Çıbak and Emrahoğlu's (2008) study examined the impact of project-based learning on the growth of logical thinking skills in seventh-grade primary school children and concluded that it was very beneficial. Similar to

this, Başbay (2005) demonstrated how project-based learning improves the learning process, encourages teamwork, heightens accountability, and fosters creativity.

This study found that allowing the students the choice to choose the project's phases and whether they worked in groups or alone was a key element in their success. This result is in line with Kalaycı's (2008) research, which examined how college students handle the project-based learning phases. Her research led students to think that groups should be formed by the students themselves and that the group should decide on the allocation of tasks. They also indicated their enthusiasm for developing original items after the project's conclusion.

German irregular verbs may be taught effectively through project-based learning since it helps students not only learn the irregular verbs but also develop their written communication abilities. Additionally, this approach can increase students' motivation and involvement in the course contents. Students who participate in project-based learning can have a deeper understanding of the language and how it is used in real-world situations, which can improve their overall language ability.

In project-based learning, while students are actively engaged in the classroom, there is a significant responsibility that falls on the instructor. It takes a considerable amount of time and energy for the instructor to examine the projects prepared by the students every week and provide feedback. Öztuna Kaplan & Coşkun Diker's (2012) research supports this conclusion, indicating that teachers may experience feelings of tiredness and boredom due to their involvement in projects outside of the classroom.

The contributions of a PBL to the learning process have been demonstrated in this study. Based on the fact that an effective planning process is necessary for the organization of student-centered learning environments, it is believed that curriculum development experts should take part in the implementation of these programs.

Since it takes too much time and energy from the instructor, practice hours can be added to the prescribed courses. Thus, the instructor saves time for projects outside the classroom.

In this paper, project-based learning was carried out within the scope of the writing skills course. Similar studies can be carried out within the scope of other courses in the German teaching curriculum.

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