

# Methods of Teaching German at the A1 Level to Students with Heterogeneous Proficiency Levels in Higher Education Institutions

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**Abstract.** In higher education institutions, foreign language classes often include students with different prior knowledge and learning abilities. This heterogeneity creates challenges for instructors, particularly in beginner-level courses such as A1 German. The present study examines effective teaching methods for instructing A1-level German to students with heterogeneous proficiency levels in universities. The research explores differentiated instruction, communicative language teaching, cooperative learning, and the use of digital tools as strategies to address diverse learner needs. Data were collected through classroom observations, student feedback, and analysis of learning outcomes in beginner German courses. The findings suggest that flexible teaching methods and learner-centered approaches significantly improve participation, comprehension, and motivation among students with mixed abilities. The study concludes that structured differentiation and interactive learning activities play a crucial role in successfully teaching A1 German in heterogeneous classrooms.

**Keywords:** *German language teaching; A1 level; heterogeneous classrooms; differentiated instruction; higher education*

## 1. Introduction

In recent decades, the importance of foreign language learning in higher education has increased significantly due to globalization, international mobility, and academic collaboration. Universities are expected to prepare students with linguistic competencies that enable them to participate in international academic, professional, and cultural environments. Among the widely taught foreign languages, German plays an important role, particularly in Europe, due to Germany's strong academic, scientific, and economic influence. Consequently, many higher education institutions offer German language courses as part of their curriculum, often beginning at the A1 level for students with little or no prior knowledge of the language (Council of Europe, 2020).

However, one of the most common challenges faced by foreign language instructors in universities is the presence of heterogeneous classrooms, where students possess different levels of language proficiency, learning strategies, and educational experiences. Heterogeneity may arise from several factors, including differences in students' previous language learning experiences, motivation levels, cognitive abilities, and exposure to the target language outside the classroom (Lightbown & Spada,

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2013). In such environments, instructors must address the needs of both complete beginners and students who may already have some familiarity with the language.

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) describes the A1 level as the stage where learners can understand and use familiar everyday expressions and very basic phrases aimed at satisfying concrete needs. Learners at this level should be able to introduce themselves and others, ask and answer simple questions about personal details such as where they live, people they know, and things they possess (Council of Europe, 2020). Despite these clearly defined learning objectives, achieving them in heterogeneous groups can be difficult because students progress at different speeds and require varying levels of support.

Research in language pedagogy emphasizes that traditional teacher-centered instruction is often insufficient in heterogeneous classrooms. Instead, learner-centered approaches are recommended because they allow teachers to adapt teaching strategies according to students' individual needs and abilities (Harmer, 2015). One of the most widely discussed approaches for addressing diverse learning needs is differentiated instruction, which involves modifying teaching content, learning activities, and assessment methods to accommodate different levels of student readiness and learning styles (Tomlinson, 2017). Differentiation allows teachers to provide both support for weaker learners and challenges for more advanced students within the same classroom.

Another important methodological framework in foreign language education is Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). This approach emphasizes the development of communicative competence through meaningful interaction rather than the memorization of grammatical rules. According to Richards and Rodgers (2014), communicative approaches encourage learners to use the language actively in realistic contexts, thereby improving both fluency and confidence. In heterogeneous classrooms, communicative activities such as pair work, group discussions, and role-playing can provide opportunities for students of different proficiency levels to participate and collaborate.

In addition to communicative methods, cooperative learning strategies have been shown to be particularly effective in mixed-ability language classrooms. Cooperative learning involves students working together in small groups to achieve shared learning goals. This approach promotes peer support, active participation, and mutual responsibility for learning outcomes (Johnson & Johnson, 2017). In language learning contexts, cooperative tasks can help weaker learners receive assistance from their peers while reinforcing the knowledge of more advanced students.

Technological developments have also significantly influenced modern language education. Digital tools such as online language platforms, mobile applications, and multimedia resources provide new opportunities for personalized learning and independent practice (Babayev, 2025). According to Godwin-Jones (2018), technology-enhanced language learning enables students to engage with authentic materials, practice language skills outside the classroom, and learn at their own pace. In heterogeneous classrooms, digital tools can support differentiated learning by offering individualized exercises and immediate feedback (Alisoy & Sadiqzade, 2024).

Despite the growing body of research on language teaching methodologies, the practical implementation of effective strategies for heterogeneous beginner classes remains a challenge for many instructors. Teachers must carefully balance the pace of instruction, design tasks that address different proficiency levels, and maintain an inclusive learning environment that motivates all students. This requires not only pedagogical knowledge but also continuous reflection on teaching practices and student learning outcomes.

Therefore, examining effective teaching methods for heterogeneous A1-level German classes in higher education is essential for improving language instruction (Aslanova, 2025). The present study aims to explore how differentiated instruction, communicative language teaching, cooperative learning, and digital technologies can be used to address the diverse needs of students in beginner German courses (Babazade, 2024). By analyzing classroom practices and student responses, this research seeks to identify pedagogical strategies that enhance participation, motivation, and language acquisition in mixed-ability university classrooms (Murad et al, 2025).

## 2. Methods

This study employed a mixed-methods research design, combining qualitative and quantitative approaches to investigate the effectiveness of different teaching methods in heterogeneous A1-level German classes in higher education. Mixed-methods research is particularly suitable for educational studies because it allows researchers to analyze both measurable learning outcomes and students' subjective learning experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

The qualitative component of the study focused on classroom observations and instructor reflections to understand how different teaching strategies were implemented and how students interacted during lessons. The quantitative component involved the analysis of student assessment results and questionnaire responses to evaluate improvements in language proficiency and learner engagement.

The research was conducted over the course of one academic semester (approximately 14 weeks) in a beginner German course at a higher education institution. During this period, several instructional strategies designed to address heterogeneous learning needs were systematically implemented and evaluated.

### 2.2 Participants

The participants consisted of first-year undergraduate students enrolled in an A1-level German language course. A total of 28 students participated in the study.

The students represented diverse educational and linguistic backgrounds. Based on a diagnostic placement test administered at the beginning of the semester, the students were divided into three general proficiency categories:

1. **Beginner group (12 students)** – students with no previous knowledge of German.
2. **Elementary group (10 students)** – students with minimal exposure to German from secondary school education.

3. **Pre-intermediate beginner group (6 students)** – students who possessed some basic vocabulary and grammar knowledge but lacked communicative competence.

The heterogeneity of the class was therefore evident in terms of prior knowledge, learning pace, and confidence in language use. Such diversity required the implementation of flexible teaching strategies to ensure that all students could actively participate in the learning process.

Participation in the research activities, including questionnaires and classroom observations, was voluntary, and student anonymity was maintained throughout the study.

## **2.3 Instructional Context**

The German course was conducted three times per week, with each session lasting 90 minutes. The course followed the learning objectives established by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) for A1-level learners.

The curriculum focused on the development of the four fundamental language skills:

- **Listening**
- **Speaking**
- **Reading**
- **Writing**

Key thematic topics included:

- Introducing oneself and others
- Personal information and daily routines
- Family and social relationships
- Numbers, dates, and time
- Basic shopping and ordering food
- Directions and locations

The primary teaching materials consisted of a standard A1 German textbook supplemented by additional multimedia resources, worksheets, and digital learning platforms.

## **2.4 Data Collection Instruments**

### **2.4.1 Diagnostic Placement Test**

At the beginning of the semester, students completed a diagnostic language test designed to determine their initial proficiency levels. The test included sections on vocabulary recognition, basic grammar knowledge, and simple reading comprehension tasks.

The results of this test were used to identify the heterogeneity of the group and to design differentiated learning activities throughout the course.

### **2.4.2 Classroom Observations**

Systematic classroom observations were conducted during selected lessons throughout the semester. The observations focused on:

- Student participation in classroom activities
- Interaction patterns during group and pair work
- Student responses to differentiated tasks
- The effectiveness of communicative and cooperative learning activities

Observation notes were recorded after each session to document patterns of student engagement and interaction.

### **2.4.3 Student Questionnaires**

At the end of the semester, students completed a questionnaire designed to evaluate their perceptions of the teaching methods used in the course. The questionnaire included both closed-ended and open-ended questions addressing:

- Student motivation and confidence in learning German
- Perceived usefulness of communicative activities
- Effectiveness of group work and peer learning
- The role of digital learning tools in language practice

This instrument provided insight into students' attitudes toward different instructional strategies.

### **2.4.4 Language Assessments**

Students' language progress was measured through several assessment methods, including:

- Vocabulary quizzes
- Grammar exercises
- Listening comprehension tasks
- Short written assignments
- Oral communication activities

These assessments were conducted periodically throughout the semester to monitor learning progress and identify areas requiring additional support.

## **2.5 Instructional Strategies Implemented**

To address the challenges of heterogeneous learning groups, several pedagogical approaches were integrated into the teaching process.

### **2.5.1 Differentiated Instruction**

Differentiated instruction was applied by designing tasks with varying levels of complexity. For example, beginners were asked to complete simple vocabulary matching exercises, while more advanced learners were required to form complete sentences or short dialogues using the same vocabulary items.

Additional support materials were provided for students who needed more practice, while extension activities were offered to students who progressed more quickly.

### **2.5.2 Communicative Language Teaching**

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) was used to encourage meaningful interaction in the classroom (Javid, 2023). Activities included role-playing everyday situations such as introducing oneself, asking for directions, or ordering food in a restaurant (Javid & Sayyara, 2024).

These activities aimed to develop students' communicative competence, which includes not only grammatical accuracy but also the ability to use language appropriately in social contexts (Richards & Rodgers, 2014).

### **2.5.3 Cooperative Learning**

Students frequently worked in mixed-ability groups to complete tasks such as dialogue construction, vocabulary games, and problem-solving exercises. Cooperative learning promotes peer interaction and allows students with stronger language skills to support those who may be struggling (Johnson & Johnson, 2017).

This method also encourages the development of social skills and increases students' sense of responsibility for group learning outcomes.

### **2.5.4 Integration of Digital Learning Tools**

Digital resources were incorporated into the course to provide additional opportunities for language practice. These included:

- Online vocabulary exercises
- Interactive grammar quizzes
- Listening comprehension videos
- Mobile language learning applications (Ismayilli & Nuri, 2025).

Digital tools allowed students to practice language skills independently and receive immediate feedback on their performance (Godwin-Jones, 2018).

## 2.6 Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using both qualitative and quantitative methods.

Quantitative data from assessments and questionnaires were analyzed using descriptive statistics to identify patterns in student performance and attitudes toward different teaching methods (Huseyn & Babayev, 2025).

Qualitative data from classroom observations and instructor reflection notes were analyzed through thematic analysis. This process involved identifying recurring patterns related to student engagement, participation, and learning difficulties.

By combining multiple data sources, the study aimed to provide a comprehensive understanding of how different teaching strategies influence learning outcomes in heterogeneous A1 German classes.

## 3. Results

The results of this study provide insight into the effectiveness of different teaching methods used in heterogeneous A1-level German classes in higher education. The findings are based on classroom observations, student questionnaires, and the analysis of language assessments conducted during the semester. The results indicate that the implementation of differentiated instruction, communicative teaching strategies, cooperative learning, and digital learning tools had a positive impact on student engagement, participation, and learning outcomes.

### 3.1 Student Participation and Classroom Interaction

One of the most noticeable outcomes of the implemented teaching strategies was the increase in student participation during classroom activities. Classroom observations revealed that communicative activities such as pair work, group discussions, and role-playing exercises significantly encouraged students to interact with one another.

Students who initially demonstrated hesitation in speaking German became more willing to participate when they were given opportunities to practice in smaller groups rather than speaking in front of the entire class. Pair work activities, in particular, reduced anxiety among beginner students and created a supportive learning environment. These observations are consistent with previous studies that highlight the importance of communicative activities in improving language confidence and participation (Richards & Rodgers, 2014).

Moreover, mixed-ability group work allowed students to engage in meaningful communication despite differences in proficiency levels. More advanced students often took leadership roles during group tasks, helping beginners understand instructions and complete assignments.

### 3.2 Improvement in Vocabulary Acquisition

Assessment results indicated that students showed significant improvement in vocabulary acquisition throughout the semester. Vocabulary quizzes conducted every three weeks demonstrated gradual progress in students' ability to recognize and use common German words and expressions.

At the beginning of the course, the average vocabulary test score was relatively low, particularly among students who had no prior exposure to German. However, by the end of the semester, the majority of students achieved satisfactory results in vocabulary assessments.

The use of differentiated vocabulary tasks contributed to this improvement. Beginners practiced basic vocabulary recognition through matching exercises and flashcards, while students with higher proficiency levels practiced constructing simple sentences using newly learned words.

Additionally, the use of digital vocabulary tools and online practice exercises allowed students to review vocabulary independently outside the classroom. Many students reported that mobile learning applications and online quizzes helped them reinforce vocabulary learning at their own pace (Babayev, 2022).

### **3.3 Development of Basic Communicative Skills**

Another important finding of the study was the improvement in students' basic communicative competence, particularly in speaking and listening skills. By the end of the semester, most students were able to perform simple communicative tasks aligned with the A1 level of the CEFR.

Students successfully completed activities such as:

- Introducing themselves and others
- Asking and answering simple personal questions
- Describing daily routines
- Ordering food in a simulated restaurant scenario
- Asking for directions

Oral assessments conducted during the final weeks of the course indicated that students were able to participate in short dialogues using basic sentence structures and everyday vocabulary.

The communicative teaching approach used during the course played an important role in developing these skills (Babayev, 2023). Role-playing activities and situational dialogues provided students with practical opportunities to use the language in realistic contexts. As a result, students demonstrated improved pronunciation, increased fluency, and greater confidence when speaking German.

### **3.4 Impact of Cooperative Learning**

Cooperative learning activities had a positive impact on both academic performance and classroom dynamics. Mixed-ability group work encouraged students to collaborate and share knowledge. Observations revealed that stronger students frequently assisted beginners by explaining grammar rules, translating unfamiliar vocabulary, or demonstrating correct pronunciation.

This form of peer-assisted learning benefited both groups of students. Beginners received additional explanations from their classmates, while more advanced students reinforced their understanding by

teaching others. Cooperative tasks also helped create a supportive and inclusive classroom atmosphere.

Furthermore, students reported in questionnaires that group work made the learning process more enjoyable and less stressful. Many participants stated that collaborative activities helped them feel more comfortable using the language in class.

### **3.5 Student Motivation and Attitudes Toward Learning German**

Student questionnaires indicated a generally positive attitude toward the teaching methods used in the course. Most students expressed satisfaction with the interactive nature of the lessons and appreciated the variety of learning activities.

Several factors contributed to increased student motivation:

- interactive classroom activities
- opportunities for communication practice
- supportive peer interaction
- the use of multimedia and digital resources

Students particularly valued the use of videos, online exercises, and mobile language learning applications, which allowed them to practice German outside the classroom. These digital tools were perceived as engaging and helpful for reviewing difficult topics (Alisoy, 2023).

In addition, differentiated tasks helped reduce frustration among students who felt they were progressing at a slower pace than their classmates. By providing tasks at appropriate difficulty levels, the instructor ensured that all students could participate meaningfully in classroom activities.

### **3.6 Overall Learning Outcomes**

Overall, the results demonstrate that the combination of differentiated instruction, communicative language teaching, cooperative learning, and digital tools contributed to positive learning outcomes in heterogeneous A1 German classes.

By the end of the semester:

- Most students achieved the basic learning objectives defined for the A1 level.
- Student participation in communicative activities increased significantly.
- Vocabulary retention and grammar comprehension improved across all proficiency groups.
- Students reported higher confidence in using German for simple everyday communication.

These findings suggest that flexible teaching methods can effectively address the challenges associated with heterogeneous language classrooms in higher education.

#### 4. Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine effective methods for teaching A1-level German to students with heterogeneous proficiency levels in higher education institutions. The results demonstrate that a combination of differentiated instruction, communicative language teaching, cooperative learning, and the integration of digital technologies can significantly enhance learning outcomes in mixed-ability language classrooms. These findings are consistent with previous research in foreign language pedagogy, which emphasizes the importance of flexible, learner-centered teaching strategies in diverse educational environments.

One of the most significant findings of this study is the positive impact of differentiated instruction on student engagement and learning progress. In heterogeneous classrooms, students often demonstrate varying levels of prior knowledge, learning speeds, and motivation. Without appropriate instructional adjustments, some learners may become overwhelmed while others may feel insufficiently challenged (Babayev, 2021). Differentiated instruction addresses this issue by adapting tasks, materials, and teaching methods to accommodate students' individual learning needs (Tomlinson, 2017).

In the present study, differentiated tasks allowed beginners to focus on fundamental vocabulary and basic sentence structures, while more advanced learners were able to engage in more complex communicative activities. This approach helped maintain an appropriate level of challenge for all students and prevented disengagement among both weaker and stronger learners. Previous research has shown that differentiated instruction promotes greater learner autonomy and supports individualized learning pathways, particularly in mixed-ability classrooms (Hall, Strangman, & Meyer, 2014).

Another important finding concerns the effectiveness of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in beginner-level German courses. The results indicate that communicative activities such as role-plays, pair discussions, and situational dialogues significantly improved students' confidence and willingness to speak. Rather than focusing solely on grammar memorization, communicative methods emphasize the practical use of language in meaningful contexts (Richards & Rodgers, 2014).

This approach is particularly valuable at the A1 level, where learners must acquire the ability to perform simple communicative tasks in everyday situations. By participating in interactive activities, students are exposed to authentic language use and develop essential communicative skills. According to Harmer (2015), communicative teaching methods help learners develop not only grammatical competence but also sociolinguistic and pragmatic competence, which are necessary for real-life communication.

The study also highlights the importance of cooperative learning in heterogeneous language classrooms. Cooperative learning involves students working together to achieve shared learning goals, often in small groups with mixed proficiency levels. In this study, mixed-ability group work facilitated peer support and knowledge sharing. More proficient students frequently assisted beginners by

explaining vocabulary and grammar concepts, while beginners benefited from additional explanations provided in a supportive learning environment.

Research by Johnson and Johnson (2017) suggests that cooperative learning enhances both academic achievement and social interaction in educational settings. In language classrooms, peer collaboration allows students to practice communication in a less formal and less stressful environment compared to teacher-centered instruction. Furthermore, collaborative learning promotes the development of interpersonal skills and encourages students to take responsibility for their own learning as well as the learning of their peers.

Another important aspect discussed in this study is the role of digital technologies in language learning. The integration of digital tools, including online exercises, vocabulary applications, and multimedia materials, contributed positively to students' motivation and independent learning. Digital resources allow learners to practice language skills outside the classroom and provide opportunities for personalized learning experiences (Alisoy, 2025).

According to Godwin-Jones (2018), technology-enhanced language learning supports flexible and autonomous learning by enabling students to access interactive materials and immediate feedback. In heterogeneous classrooms, digital tools can be particularly valuable because they allow learners to progress at their own pace. Students who require additional practice can review materials repeatedly, while more advanced learners can explore additional content beyond the core curriculum.

The results of this study also highlight the importance of creating a supportive and inclusive learning environment. Language learning can often be associated with anxiety, particularly among beginner students who may feel insecure about their speaking abilities. The use of communicative and cooperative activities helped reduce language anxiety by encouraging students to interact in smaller groups and supportive peer contexts. Previous studies have shown that reducing language anxiety can significantly improve learners' willingness to communicate and overall language acquisition (MacIntyre & Gregersen, 2012).

Despite the positive findings, several challenges associated with heterogeneous classrooms should be acknowledged. Implementing differentiated instruction requires careful lesson planning and the development of varied teaching materials. Instructors must invest additional time and effort to design activities that address different proficiency levels while still maintaining coherent lesson objectives. Moreover, managing group activities in large classes can sometimes be difficult, particularly when students demonstrate significantly different learning speeds (Aslanova, 2017).

Nevertheless, the findings of this study suggest that the benefits of using flexible teaching strategies outweigh these challenges. By combining differentiated instruction, communicative language teaching, cooperative learning, and digital technologies, instructors can effectively address the diverse needs of students in heterogeneous A1 German classes.

Future research could further explore the long-term impact of these teaching methods on language proficiency development. Additional studies might also investigate how technological innovations,

such as artificial intelligence–based language learning platforms or virtual reality environments, can support differentiated instruction in foreign language education.

In conclusion, the results of this study confirm that heterogeneous classrooms should not be viewed solely as a challenge but also as an opportunity to implement innovative and interactive teaching methods. When appropriate pedagogical strategies are applied, mixed-ability groups can foster collaborative learning, increased student engagement, and improved language acquisition in higher education contexts.

## 5. Conclusion

Teaching German at the A1 level in heterogeneous classrooms within higher education institutions presents both pedagogical challenges and opportunities for innovative instructional practices. The findings of this study demonstrate that the use of flexible and learner-centered teaching methods can effectively address the diverse needs of students with different levels of language proficiency. In particular, differentiated instruction allows instructors to adapt learning activities to individual student abilities, ensuring that both beginners and more advanced learners remain engaged in the learning process.

Furthermore, communicative language teaching and cooperative learning strategies encourage active participation and provide students with meaningful opportunities to practice the target language in realistic contexts (Javid, 2023). The integration of digital learning tools also supports independent learning and reinforces classroom instruction by enabling students to practice at their own pace.

Overall, the results suggest that combining differentiated instruction, communicative activities, collaborative learning, and technology-based resources can significantly enhance student motivation, participation, and language acquisition in heterogeneous A1 German classes in higher education.

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