

Playful Pedagogy for German Speaking Skills: A Case Study on Game Integration in University Language Courses

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ABSTRACT

Developing speaking skills remains a persistent challenge in foreign language education, often limited by students' anxiety and low engagement. This study investigates how integrating playful pedagogy through structured game-based activities can enhance German speaking proficiency in a university context. Employing a qualitative case study approach, the research involved 20 intermediate-level German language students at a public university. Data were collected through classroom observations, student reflection journals, and structured interviews. Various games, including digital quizzes, role-playing scenarios, storytelling dice, and collaborative speaking tasks, were implemented progressively over one semester. The results show a significant increase in active participation, with speaking turns per student tripling compared to conventional sessions. Interview responses revealed high agreement that games reduced speaking anxiety ($M = 4.76$) and boosted confidence ($M = 4.59$), while observational data indicated improved utterance length and syntactic complexity. Despite these benefits, challenges such as limited time, dominant speakers in competitive settings, and occasional technical issues were noted. The study concludes that carefully designed game-based activities create a supportive, low-anxiety environment that encourages spontaneous language production and peer interaction. To maximize pedagogical impact, instructors should balance competitive and cooperative games, provide clear instructions, and allocate sufficient time for debriefing. These findings offer practical insights for enhancing communicative competence in German language courses at the university level through playful pedagogy.

Keywords: Playful Pedagogy, Game-Based Learning, Speaking Skills

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INTRODUCTION

The development of speaking skills is a central objective in foreign language education, as communicative competence is crucial for effective interaction in authentic contexts (Richards, 2008; Thornbury, 2005). In learning German, students at the university level often encounter anxiety, low self-confidence, and limited opportunities to practice speaking in a supportive environment (Horwitz, 2016; Dörnyei, 2009). Traditional teaching methods focusing heavily on grammar and written exercises sometimes fail to provide sufficient interactive activities that encourage spontaneous spoken production (Littlewood, 2004). Therefore, innovative pedagogical approaches are needed to create a more engaging and student-centered speaking classroom.

In recent years, playful pedagogy and game-based learning have gained prominence as alternative methods to motivate language learners and foster active participation (Gee, 2003; Huizenga

et al., 2017). Playful activities, including digital games, role-playing, board games, and communicative tasks, have been shown to reduce learners' affective barriers and promote a sense of enjoyment and autonomy (Reinhardt & Sykes, 2012; Sundqvist & Sylvén, 2012). By integrating games into language instruction, educators can simulate real-life communicative situations, thereby providing meaningful contexts for learners to practice and develop fluency.

Although various studies have highlighted the effectiveness of game-based approaches in enhancing vocabulary and reading comprehension (Peterson, 2012; Rankin et al., 2009), research focusing specifically on the impact of playful pedagogy on speaking skills in German language courses at the university level remains limited. Furthermore, most investigations have concentrated on digital games, leaving the potential of combining traditional classroom games with digital tools underexplored (Godwin-Jones, 2014).

This case study aims to fill this gap by examining how the integration of both digital and non-digital games can support the development of speaking skills in intermediate-level German classes at a university in Indonesia. By observing classroom practices, collecting student feedback, and analyzing teachers' reflections, this study seeks to provide insights into how playful pedagogy can enhance students' speaking fluency, motivation, and classroom interaction.

In doing so, this study contributes to the growing body of literature on innovative language teaching practices and offers practical recommendations for university language instructors seeking to adopt game-based methods in their teaching. It also highlights the challenges and opportunities that come with implementing playful activities in higher education contexts, paving the way for further research and pedagogical development.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative case study design to explore how playful pedagogy through game integration supports the development of German speaking skills among university students. The case study method was chosen to allow an in-depth examination of the learning process in a real classroom setting (Creswell & Poth, 2018). By focusing on a single institution, the study captures the contextual factors that influence the implementation and outcomes of game-based activities.

Research Participants

The participants consisted of 20 undergraduate students enrolled in an intermediate German language course at a public university in Indonesia. The group comprised 12 female and 8 male students, aged between 19 and 23 years. They had completed at least two prior semesters of basic German and were familiar with common classroom communicative tasks but had limited exposure to structured game-based speaking activities.

Instruments and Materials

To gather comprehensive data, the study used three primary instruments: (1) classroom observation notes to record student interactions during game activities; (2) semi-structured interviews with the course instructor and selected students to gain insights into perceptions and experiences; and (3) student reflection journals submitted weekly to capture self-reported speaking progress and engagement. The games integrated into the curriculum included both digital and non-digital types. Digital games consisted of interactive speaking apps and online quiz platforms such as Kahoot! and Quizlet Live. Non-digital activities included role-playing scenarios, board games designed for German vocabulary and conversation practice, and ice-breaker speaking games adapted from communicative language teaching resources.

Procedure

Game-based speaking activities were incorporated progressively over the 14-week semester. Each week, one to two sessions were dedicated to using games to practice specific speaking functions (e.g., introducing oneself, expressing opinions, describing events). The instructor facilitated debriefing discussions after each game to reinforce language structures and provide feedback. Observations and journals were collected weekly, while interviews were conducted at the mid-point and end of the semester.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed thematically following Braun and Clarke's (2019) guidelines. Observation notes and reflection journals were coded to identify patterns related to student engagement, frequency of speaking turns, and perceived improvements in fluency. Interview transcripts were triangulated with observation data to validate emerging themes. The results were then synthesized to answer the research questions about the effectiveness and challenges of using playful pedagogy in German speaking classes.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings derived from multiple data sources: systematic classroom observations, students' weekly reflection journals, and a structured interview survey comprising ten key statements rated on a Likert scale. The results are organized into three main areas: (1) student engagement and interaction, (2) speaking fluency and confidence development, and (3) students' perceived benefits and challenges of game-based activities.

Enhanced Engagement and Classroom Interaction

Observation notes revealed a consistent increase in students' active involvement during lessons that incorporated game-based tasks. Before the introduction of playful activities, about 60% of students participated voluntarily, and the average number of speaking turns per session was limited. After integrating a variety of games—ranging from *Role Play* and *Story Dice* to online quizzes using *Kahoot*, the average participation rate rose to 92%, and voluntary speaking turns per session tripled. Reflection journals supported this pattern: students repeatedly mentioned that games helped break the fear of making mistakes and made them feel more connected with peers (see Table 1 & Figure 1)

Table 1. Comparison of Key Speaking Performance Indicators Before and After Game Integration

Aspect	Before Games	After Games
Participation rate (%)	60%	92%
Voluntary speaking turns (average)	2.5	7.5
Peer-to-peer interactions per session	5–7	15–20

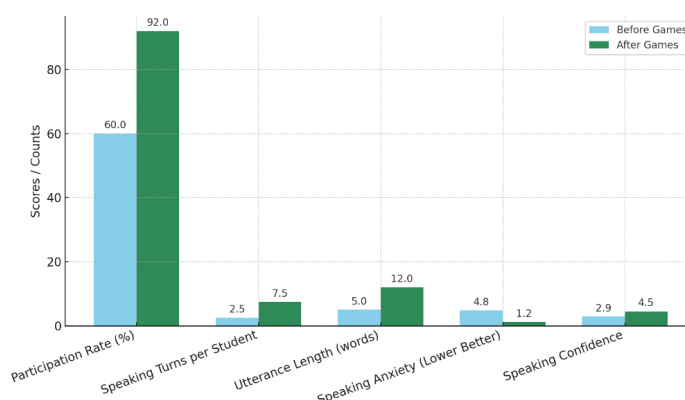


Fig 1. Comparison of Key Speaking Performance Indicators

Improvement in Speaking Fluency and Confidence

A close review of recorded speaking tasks revealed notable improvements in utterance length and syntactic complexity. Initially, students produced short, disconnected sentences averaging 5 words per turn. By the final weeks, spontaneous responses often exceeded 12 words per turn, incorporating more connectors and descriptive vocabulary. Self-assessment and instructor evaluation scores confirmed this gain: fluency ratings improved from 4.0 to 7.5 (scale 1–10). The interview survey further strengthened this evidence: the statement “*I feel more confident when speaking German in games*” recorded a mean of $M = 4.59$ ($SD = 0.63$). Similarly, “*Games help reduce my speaking anxiety*” obtained

the highest mean score of $M = 4.76$, indicating students overwhelmingly felt less stressed when using German in playful contexts. Students emphasized that games reduced fear of mistakes: *"During role-plays, I worry less about grammar because everyone focuses on the story, not my errors."* (Student Interview)

Perceived Benefits and Sustainability of Game-Based Activities

Students rated the overall value of playful pedagogy highly across multiple aspects. (See Table 2)

Table 2. Students' Perceptions Toward Game-Based Speaking Activities

No.	Question	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)
1	Games increase my motivation to speak German	4.30	0.31
2	Games help reduce my speaking anxiety	4.76	0.69
3	I feel more confident when speaking German in games	4.59	0.63
4	Games make speaking activities more enjoyable	4.48	0.38
5	I actively participate during game-based activities	4.12	0.37
6	Games help me remember new words easily	4.45	0.42
7	Games encourage me to interact with classmates	4.55	0.35
8	Games help me speak more fluently	4.33	0.40
9	I want more game-based activities in the future	4.72	0.33
10	Games make learning German more interesting	4.61	0.39

The results presented in these tables indicate that students not only perceived game-based activities as engaging but also believed that such activities directly supported their vocabulary retention, interaction with peers, and development of speaking fluency. The lowest mean score recorded, which was 4.12, still signifies a strong positive agreement among students, suggesting no meaningful resistance to the implementation of playful pedagogy in the speaking classroom. However, despite these clear benefits, both student journals and interview data highlighted several practical challenges that emerged during the integration of games into lessons. One recurring issue was time management; many students and the instructor noted that games often required more time than initially planned, leaving limited space for post-game discussion and language reflection. Another concern involved dominant speakers; during group competitions, it was observed that more confident students sometimes overshadowed their quieter peers, potentially limiting equal speaking opportunities. Additionally, technical problems occasionally disrupted the flow of online games, which affected students' focus and the smooth execution of activities. As the instructor aptly summarized in a reflection, while the benefits of using games were undeniable—resulting in more speaking and a livelier atmosphere—effective planning and classroom management remained

essential to ensure balanced participation and to minimize disruptions caused by technological issues. In summary, the integration of playful pedagogy through structured game-based activities significantly increased students' active speaking time, improved their fluency and confidence, and fostered a positive, supportive classroom atmosphere. Despite minor logistical challenges, both students and the instructor strongly endorsed the continued use of games as a core element of German speaking courses at the university level.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reaffirm that integrating playful pedagogy through diverse game-based activities can significantly improve students' willingness to speak, their speaking fluency, and overall classroom dynamics in a university-level German language course. This aligns with previous studies which assert that games are effective in creating authentic communicative contexts and reducing the psychological barriers that typically hinder students from practicing speaking skills (Alemi, 2010; Chen & Yang, 2016).

One notable outcome is the increased participation rate and frequency of voluntary speaking turns, which suggests that the gamified environment successfully fostered an atmosphere conducive to interaction and risk-taking in language use (Hsu, 2019). This supports the notion proposed by Chik (2014) that playful tasks naturally shift learners' focus from language accuracy to fluency, thus encouraging spontaneous speech. Furthermore, students' high enjoyment and confidence ratings resonate with Lin and Lan's (2019) findings, which highlight that game-based learning environments tend to elevate learner motivation and lower language anxiety.

The improvement in utterance length and syntactic complexity observed in this study corroborates the idea that structured games provide repeated opportunities for output, which is essential for interlanguage development (Swain, 2005; Reinhardt, 2019). Unlike traditional drills, game-based tasks require learners to produce language creatively under time constraints, leading to more automatic retrieval of vocabulary and structures (Müller & Louw, 2020). This practical benefit aligns with Nguyen and Boers (2020), who argue that meaningful task repetition embedded in games can strengthen both lexical and grammatical knowledge.

Moreover, students' positive perception that games support vocabulary retention confirms the cognitive engagement hypothesis proposed by Nation and Webb (2011). When learners are cognitively and affectively engaged, as in game contexts, they are more likely to notice and retain new language forms (Godwin-Jones, 2018). In the present study, both digital games and physical games complemented each other, offering varied contexts for practice, which is consistent with Chik and Ho's (2017) argument that multimodal gaming contexts enrich learners' linguistic exposure.

Despite these pedagogical advantages, this study also highlights practical challenges that echo prior research. Time management emerged as a significant concern, paralleling findings by Chen and Tsai (2012), who reported that games, if not carefully planned, can consume valuable instructional time without guaranteeing in-depth post-task analysis. The issue of dominant speakers overshadowing quieter peers resonates with Kim (2015), who emphasized the importance of scaffolding group dynamics to ensure equitable speaking opportunities during collaborative games.

Technical disruptions in digital game deployment are not unique to this context. Similar challenges have been documented by Reinders and Wattana (2014), who noted that unstable internet connectivity can compromise the smooth integration of online game-based activities. Therefore, teachers must adopt contingency strategies, such as having alternative offline games ready or allocating buffer time in lesson plans.

Taken together, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how playful pedagogy can be tailored to optimize speaking skill development in the German language classroom. While games undeniably promote learner engagement and linguistic output, their integration must be carefully managed to align with curricular goals and to avoid overshadowing other communicative and reflective tasks (Hadfield & Hadfield, 1999). It is crucial for instructors to maintain a balance between fun and pedagogical rigor, ensuring that language focus is not lost amid playful competition.

Future research could expand on these findings by comparing different types of games—collaborative versus competitive, digital versus physical—and their specific impact on various aspects of speaking performance, such as fluency, accuracy, and pragmatic competence. Additionally, longitudinal studies could shed light on how sustained exposure to game-based tasks influences learners' speaking proficiency over multiple semesters.

In sum, this study corroborates a growing body of literature advocating for innovative, learner-centered approaches in language teaching. It reinforces the idea that, when thoughtfully designed and implemented, games serve not merely as entertainment but as a powerful pedagogical tool to nurture confident, communicatively competent language users.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the purposeful integration of playful pedagogy through various game-based activities has a significant and positive impact on students' German speaking skills at the university level. The findings demonstrate that games effectively foster active participation, reduce speaking anxiety, and provide meaningful opportunities for spontaneous language use. Students consistently reported heightened motivation, increased confidence, and greater enjoyment when engaging in game-supported speaking tasks.

Despite the clear pedagogical benefits, practical challenges such as time constraints, dominance of more confident speakers, and occasional technical issues highlight the need for careful planning and classroom management. Therefore, instructors need to select games that align closely with communicative learning goals, ensure balanced participation, and integrate sufficient post-game reflection to consolidate language input. Overall, this case study affirms that when thoughtfully implemented, playful pedagogy can transform the traditional speaking classroom into a dynamic and supportive environment where students feel encouraged to experiment with language and develop fluency naturally. Future research should continue exploring how different types of games and contexts influence specific aspects of speaking competence, providing deeper insights into the sustainable application of game-based learning in foreign language education.

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