

Research Article

## Evaluating Speaking Task Design in *Netzwerk Neu A1.1*: A CEFR- and TBLT-Informed Analysis

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**Abstract:** This study examines and critically analyzes speaking tasks in *Netzwerk Neu A1.1* (Chapters 1–6) by evaluating their alignment with principles of German as a Foreign Language (DaF), Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), and the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). Using qualitative content analysis, 26 speaking tasks were identified, coded, and categorized based on task type, CEFR communicative activity (spoken interaction or spoken production), interaction mode, and levels of learner output. The findings show that template-based tasks dominate the textbook, accounting for 69.2% of activities, while guided and free production tasks are relatively limited. Spoken interaction is the most prevalent communicative activity (76.9%), reflecting an emphasis on dialogic formats such as short exchanges and role plays. Although this design provides appropriate structural support for beginner learners, the limited use of open-ended and autonomous tasks may restrict the development of fluency, communicative flexibility, and strategic competence. Interviews with seven learners and two instructors reveal that while tasks are generally perceived as accessible and confidence-building, they are also considered repetitive and insufficiently authentic. The study underscores the need to balance structured support with opportunities for spontaneous language use in beginner DaF textbooks.

**Keywords:** CEFR A1; Content Analysis; DaF; Speaking Tasks; TBLT.

### 1. Introduction

Foreign language textbooks frequently claim that their sequencing of content and task design effectively promote communicative competence. These claims, however, are rarely subjected to systematic didactic evaluation, particularly with regard to speaking tasks (Sprechen) at the beginner level. As a result, there is often a gap between theoretical objectives and the actual communicative potential of textbook-based instruction.

In the field of Deutsch als Fremdsprache (DaF), instructional quality is not measured primarily by the amount of linguistic content covered, but by the extent to which learning tasks stimulate meaningful, real-life language use. According to Burwitz-Melzer et al. (2016), tasks should encourage learners to actively construct meaning, negotiate interaction, and use language purposefully rather than merely reproduce fixed forms.

Against this background, the present study examines the types, frequency, and distribution of speaking tasks in the widely used beginner-level textbook *Netzwerk Neu A1*. Special attention is given to how these tasks are designed and sequenced, as well as how far they reflect communicative principles and learner-centered pedagogy.

Furthermore, the study analyzes the alignment of these speaking tasks with the CEFR A1 descriptors, particularly in terms of spoken interaction and spoken production. To move beyond purely theoretical analysis, the textbook findings are triangulated with actual learner performance data, such as simulated results from the Goethe-Zertifikat A1 speaking component.

Received: July 13, 2025  
Revised: Oktober 30, 2025  
Accepted: November 20, 2025  
Published: January 09, 2025  
Curr. Ver.: January 09, 2026



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In addition, learner perceptions of the speaking tasks are explored to capture lived classroom experience. By integrating task analysis, learner outcomes, and learner perspectives, this study seeks to provide a more comprehensive evaluation of beginner speaking instruction and to contribute to ongoing discussions about task design quality in DaF textbooks.

## 2. Literature Review

This study is grounded in the didactic principles of Deutsch als Fremdsprache (DaF), which place meaningful language use at the center of foreign language instruction. Rather than treating language as an abstract system of rules, DaF pedagogy emphasizes language as a social practice that emerges through interaction in authentic contexts. These principles highlight the importance of situational relevance, learner engagement, and communicative purpose in the design of instructional tasks.

Central to DaF instruction is the communicative principle, which conceptualizes language as a tool for achieving interactional goals. From this perspective, successful language learning occurs when learners are able to negotiate meaning, express intentions, and respond appropriately in communicative situations. Speaking tasks are therefore expected to move beyond form-focused drills and support genuine interaction between learners.

Closely related is the action-oriented (*handlungsorientiert*) approach, which promotes learning through real-world language use. Learners are encouraged to perform concrete social actions, such as making a reservation, asking for information, or expressing a complaint. These actions reflect everyday communicative needs and help learners develop functional language skills that can be transferred beyond the classroom.

The task-based (*aufgabenorientiert*) principle further positions meaningful, context-driven tasks as the core units of instruction. According to Willis (1996) and Ellis (2003), tasks differ from traditional exercises in that they require learners to use language purposefully to achieve a non-linguistic outcome. Through such tasks, learners engage in authentic, goal-directed communication that integrates form, meaning, and use.

The competency-oriented (*kompetenzorientiert*) approach emphasizes measurable learning outcomes and practical communicative abilities. This orientation is operationalized in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), particularly at the A1 level, which specifies descriptors for spoken interaction, information exchange, and obtaining goods and services using simple language. In addition, Swain's (2005) pushed output hypothesis explains how speaking tasks can promote active language production, draw learners' attention to gaps in their linguistic knowledge, and support interlanguage development.

## 3. Research Method

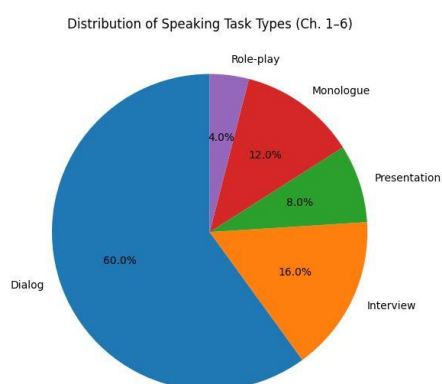
This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design, with document analysis serving as the primary method. The dataset consisted of all speaking tasks (*Sprechen*) found in Netzwerk Neu A1.1, Chapters 1 to 6, yielding a total of 26 tasks. A structured coding sheet was developed to classify each task according to several analytical variables.

The speaking tasks were coded based on task type (e.g., dialogue, monologue, interview, role-play), CEFR communicative activity (spoken interaction or spoken production), interaction mode (individual or pair work), and level of learner output (template-based, guided response, or free production). This categorization enabled a systematic examination of task characteristics and their alignment with CEFR A1 descriptors.

To complement the textbook analysis, supporting data were collected through brief semi-structured interviews with seven learners and two instructors who had used the textbook in classroom contexts. The data were analyzed using thematic and categorical procedures to identify recurring patterns, mismatches with CEFR A1 requirements, and potential areas for improving speaking task design. The findings were interpreted within the established theoretical framework to enable a critical and triangulated discussion.

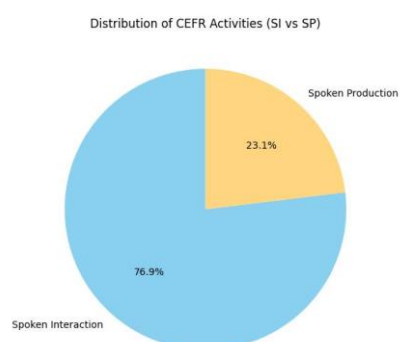
#### 4. Results and Discussion

This figure illustrates the proportion of different speaking task types found in Chapters 1 to 6, showing that dialogue-based activities dominate, followed by interviews and presentations.



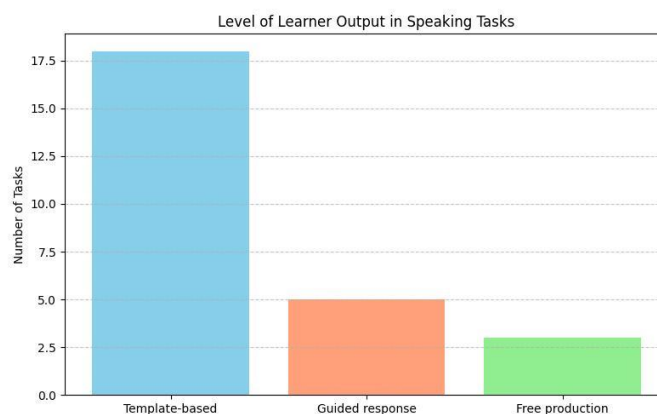
**Figure 1.** Distribution of Speaking Task Types in *Netzwerk Neu A1.1* (Ch. 1–6).

The chart shows the distribution of speaking tasks based on CEFR activity type. Most tasks are designed for spoken interaction, while fewer target spoken production.



**Figure 2.** CEFR Communicative Activities: Spoken Interaction vs. Spoken Production.

This figure displays the level of learner output required in each task, categorized as template-based, guided response, or free production.



**Figure 3.** Learner Output Levels in Speaking Tasks.

An analysis of 26 speaking tasks in *Netzwerk Neu A1.1* (Chapters 1–6) reveals that dialogue is the most dominant task type (57.7%), followed by interview and presentation (each 15.4%), while role-play is minimally represented. In terms of CEFR communicative activities, the majority of tasks (76.9%) fall under spoken interaction, while only 23.1% qualify as spoken production. This pattern suggests a strong emphasis on structured, short-turn verbal exchanges, commonly implemented through guided conversations and Q&A formats. From the perspective of learner output, most tasks (69.2%) are template-based, requiring learners to fill in predetermined sentence structures. A smaller proportion (19.2%) involves guided response, where learners have partial autonomy with support such as sentence starters or models. Only 11.5% of tasks allow for free production, requiring learners to independently construct content and form. These findings indicate that, while verbal interaction is encouraged, opportunities for autonomous spoken production remain limited.

The above findings reveal a distribution pattern that stands in partial contrast to the core tenets of task-based language teaching (TBLT) and the didactic principles of DaF. In TBLT, tasks are ideally designed to promote authentic, meaningful, and open-ended language use (Willis, 1996; Ellis, 2003), while DaF-oriented pedagogy emphasizes competence-oriented, action-based, and communicative learning, with a strong focus on contextualized and autonomous output (Burwitz-Melzer et al., 2016). Moreover, the CEFR (2020) encourages a balanced repertoire of spoken activities that includes both interaction and production, particularly in real-life scenarios. In this context, the findings suggest that although interactional formats are well represented, task variation and cognitive demand remain areas for potential enhancement.

The findings from this analysis of speaking tasks in *Netzwerk Neu A1.1* indicate a strong reliance on template-based activities, where learners are primarily expected to insert personal information into pre-structured sentence frames. While this format may provide scaffolding for beginners, the overrepresentation of such tasks (69%) limits learners' opportunities to engage in spontaneous and cognitively demanding language use. This stands in contrast to the principles of Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), which emphasize the value of authentic, open-ended, and meaning-driven tasks that simulate real-world communication (Willis, 1996; Ellis, 2003). Even at beginner levels, TBLT recommends tasks that allow for negotiation of meaning, information gaps, and learner decision-making elements that are largely absent in overly controlled dialogues.

In terms of CEFR alignment, the predominance of spoken interaction tasks (76.9%) is initially consistent with A1 descriptors, which emphasize simple exchanges in everyday social contexts. However, the limited presence of spoken production tasks (23.1%) such as short descriptions, mini-presentations, or monologic storytelling reflects a shortfall in fostering independent, sustained speech, which is also part of the A1 competence profile outlined in the CEFR Companion Volume (2020). From the perspective of DaF pedagogy, the scarcity of tasks that are *handlungsorientiert* (action-based) and *kompetenzorientiert* (competence-driven) further highlights a missed opportunity to develop learners' ability to act communicatively in authentic scenarios (Burwitz-Melzer et al., 2016). These findings echo prior studies (e.g., Wernicke, 2019) which critique the prevalence of highly repetitive dialogue tasks in beginner textbooks, arguing that such tasks often fail to challenge learners cognitively or promote reflective use of language.

Consequently, while Netzwerk Neu A1.1 demonstrates partial alignment with CEFR and DaF frameworks, the overwhelming focus on structured formats and the narrow range of learner output point to a critical need for more varied, open, and cognitively engaging speaking tasks. Future materials could benefit from a better balance between structural support and communicative freedom, allowing beginner learners to both build confidence and develop real-world speaking competencies.

In addition to document-based analysis, further insights were drawn from short interviews with seven learners and two instructors who had used Netzwerk Neu A1.1 at the A1.1 level. Most learners stated that the speaking tasks in the book supported their initial efforts to speak German, particularly due to the simplicity and contextuality of the materials. One respondent noted that “the dialogues are easy and adjusted for beginners,” while another mentioned that the book “taught the basics of word order,” which made spoken production more accessible. These comments reinforce the book’s alignment with the Kompetenzorientierung principle in DaF pedagogy, emphasizing structured support for developing basic communicative competence (Burwitz-Melzer et al., 2016).

Nonetheless, several learners expressed concerns about the repetitive and templated nature of the tasks. Although they appreciated the safety that comes with structured exercises, many felt that the speaking activities often involved mere imitation. As one learner remarked: “I try to explore vocabulary so it doesn’t get repetitive... but often I still end up using the templates from the book.” This perception echoes the earlier finding that the majority of tasks are template-based, with limited opportunities for spontaneous or creative use of language. Some students also found the vocabulary overly simple or monotonous, especially in the early chapters. Interestingly, the types of tasks they enjoyed most included paired dialogues, audio-visual prompts, open-ended presentations, and simulated role-plays activities that were perceived as both enjoyable and effective in fostering spontaneous speech.

From the instructors’ perspective, two key themes emerged. On the one hand, both acknowledged that the speaking tasks were helpful for structuring instruction, especially given the availability of ready-to-use dialogues. On the other hand, they also felt that many of the tasks were “standard” and “insufficiently challenging” for more advanced beginners. One instructor emphasized the need for more flexible and authentic tasks that could “force students to speak spontaneously,” while another suggested incorporating colloquial expressions and everyday idioms to enhance communicative realism. These comments align with research advocating for the integration of semi-structured tasks and small-scale speaking projects, which are more effective in developing learner interlanguage and increasing interactional competence (Ellis, 2003; Müller-Hartmann & Schocker-von Ditfurth, 2011).

In sum, the interviews underscore the importance of not only providing structural support for beginners but also ensuring room for expression, adaptability, and improvisation. The voices of both learners and instructors highlight that the challenge of speaking is not purely linguistic, but also affective rooted in confidence, spontaneity, and the perceived authenticity of the tasks.

## 5. Conclusion

This study has revealed that while Netzwerk Neu A1.1 incorporates key elements of CEFR and DaF didactic principles, it exhibits a marked dominance of template-based speaking tasks, with a strong emphasis on structured spoken interaction. Of the 26 speaking tasks analyzed across Chapters 1–6, 69.2% were template-based, and only 11.5% allowed for free production. Most tasks focused on controlled formats where learners were expected to imitate or complete given structures, rather than formulate their own utterances. While such design is understandable at the beginner level, it may also restrict learners' development of spontaneous and flexible speaking skills.

These findings are reinforced by learner and instructor interviews, which revealed a consistent appreciation for the structural clarity of the book, but also concerns about monotony, limited flexibility, and the lack of spontaneous interaction. Learners reported greater enjoyment and engagement when working with open-ended tasks, real-life simulations, or personal presentations. Instructors, while valuing the book's structure, advocated for more cognitively challenging and reflective tasks that better simulate authentic communication.

In light of these findings, future development of beginner-level speaking materials, particularly in textbooks such as Netzwerk, should focus on increasing the proportion of guided and free production tasks that enable learners to construct ideas and language output more independently. In addition, greater emphasis should be placed on integrating contextualized, real-life scenarios that reflect everyday language use, such as service encounters, school interactions, and informal social exchanges. Finally, task design should more explicitly address affective dimensions of language learning, including learner confidence, motivation, and willingness to speak, in order to support more meaningful and sustainable communicative development.

For teachers, the findings highlight the importance of adapting overly structured materials by incorporating open-ended questions, extended dialogue opportunities, and mini project-based interactions. Theoretically, the study supports prior research in TBLT and DaF that calls for a balance between structure and freedom, as well as between fluency and complexity in speaking development.

Taken together, these findings may serve as a foundation for revising speaking task design and teaching strategies that are better aligned with learner needs, real-world communicative goals, and current pedagogical frameworks.

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