

The German ditransitive construction: A challenge for Italian learners

Sabine De Knop & Fabio Mollica

Université Saint-Louis Bruxelles

Università degli Studi di Milano

sabine.deknop@usaintlouis.be

fabio.mollica@unimi.it



1. Introduction

- Many studies on **ditransitive construction** (DC) or **double-object-construction** (DOC)

DC: Goldberg (1992, 1995 und 2006); Gropen et al. (1989); Levin (1993);

Rappaport Hovav & Levin 2008

DOC: Cosma et al. (2014); Roreng (2011)

- Most studies for English, few studies for German:
 - Wegener (1985): possible verbs in DC;
 - Roreng (2011); Welke (2011); Zifonun, Hoffmann & Strecker (1997)
- All theoretical except
 - Baten & De Cuypere (2014): DOC in Dutch + Germ.
 - De Cuypere et al. (2014): Object order with Russian learners of English

OUR STUDY:

- Empirical study about difficulties with learning of DC for Italian learners of German, more specifically about **V with 2 ACC in the DC**
- Role of corpus data to foster the learning process

2. Definition of ditransitive construction

E.g. (1) *Der Weihnachtsmann* *schenkt* *den Kindern* *Spielzeug*
(Lit.) 'The father Christmas offers to the children toys'
SUBJECT VERB INDIRECT OBJ (IO) DIRECT OBJ (DO)
(AGENT) (CAUSE-RECEIVE) (RECIPIENT) (THEME)

In Construction Grammar:

- **Syntax:** [Subject Verb IndirectObj DirectObj]
- **Semantics:** CAUSE-RECEIVE <agt rec pat> (Goldberg 1995: 49)

2. Definition of ditransitive construction

E.g. (1) *Der Weihnachtsmann* *schenkt* *den Kindern* *Spielzeug*

(Lit.) 'The father Christmas offers to the children toys'

➤ Prototypical semantics:

- Expression of real transfer between **volitional agent** and **willing recipient**
- **IO** must be living being
- Germ. V in prototypical DC with ditransitive valency + ditransitive argument structure, e.g. *geben* 'to give', *schenken* 'to offer as a present', *zeigen* 'to show', *verkaufen* 'to sell', etc.

➤ In German morpho-syntactic **case-marking**

- **IO** in dative case
- **DO** in accusative case

3. Contrastive analysis German-Italian

3.1. German

- Flexibility in order of objects (Malchukov et al. (2007), Müller (1999) or Sauermann & Höhle (2018))

A. “unmarked order” of constituents (Lenerz 1977): [IO-DO]

(1)	<i>Der Weihnachtsmann</i>	<i>schenkt</i>	<i>den Kindern</i>	<i>Spielzeug</i>
	SUBJECT (AGENT)	VERB	INDIRECT OBJ (IO)	DIRECT OBJ (DO)
(Lit.)	‘The father Christmas	offers	to the children	toys’

B. Alternative order [DO-IO] also possible

➤ Conditions

- DO definite, IO indefinite (Malchukov et al. 2007)
E.g. (2) *Ich gab **den Apfel** **einem Kind*** ('I gave the apple to a child')
 DO IO
- Information status (theme/rheme) (Lenerz 1977)
- Length of NP (Lenerz 1977)
- Degree of animacy (Müller 1999)

“...preference for placing definite before indefinite, animate before inanimate, long before short, given before new, or non-focused before focused constituents.” (Sauermann & Höhle 2018: 1)

C. Nominal vs. pronominal objects

(3)	<i>Der Weihnachtsmann</i>	<i>schenkt</i>	<i>dem kleinen Jungen</i> [IO - NP]	<i>ein Spielzeugauto</i> [DO - NP]
	The Christmas man	offers	to the little boy	a toy car
(4)	<i>Der Weihnachtsmann</i>	<i>schenkt</i>	<i>es</i> [DO - PRO]	<i>dem kleinen Jungen</i> [IO - NP]
			<i>it</i>	<i>to the little boy</i>
(5)	<i>Der Weihnachtsmann</i>	<i>schenkt</i>	<i>ihm</i> [IO - PRO]	<i>ein Spielzeugauto</i> [DO - NP]
			<i>to him</i>	<i>a toy car</i>
(6)	<i>Der Weihnachtsmann</i>	<i>schenkt</i>	<i>es</i> [DO - PRO]	<i>ihm</i> [IO - PRO]
			<i>it</i>	<i>to him</i>
(7)	<i>Der Weihnachtsmann</i>	<i>schenkt</i>	<i>ihm</i> [IO - PRO]	<i>das</i> [DO - DEMONSTRATIVE PRO]
			<i>to him</i>	<i>that</i>

3.2. Italian

Unmarked order of objects → opposite of German

(8)	<i>Maria</i>	<i>dà</i>	<i>la rosa</i> [DO - NP]	<i>a sua madre</i> [IO - PP]
	Maria	gives	the rose	to her mother
(9)	<i>Maria</i>	<i>la</i> [DO - PRO]	<i>dà</i>	<i>a sua madre</i> [DO - NP]
	Maria	it	gives	to her mother
(10)	<i>Maria</i>	<i>gli/le</i> [IO - PRO]	<i>dà</i>	<i>la rosa</i> [DO - NP]
	Maria	to him/to her	gives	the rose
(11)	<i>Maria</i>	<i>gliela</i> [IO+DO - PRO]	<i>dà</i>	
	Maria	to him it	gives	
(12)	<i>Maria</i>	<i>la</i> [DO - PRO]	<i>dà</i>	<i>a lei</i> [IO - PRO]
	Maria	it	gives	to her

4. Learning issues for Italian learners of German

A. non-ditransitive V also possible in DC

“intended transfer” (Goldberg 1995: 141),

e.g. (13) *The mother baked her daughter a cake.*

(Goldberg 1995: 38ff; Proost 2014: 27ff),

e.g. *bewilligen* ‘to grant’, *verweigern* ‘to refuse’, *erlauben* ‘to allow’

➤ “Constructional polysemy” (Goldberg 1995: 33)

“Constructional variants” (Symanczyk Joppe, Külpmann & Neuhaus 2020: 15)

B. V with ditransitive semantics with double accusative object (2ACC)

ACC both for **theme** and **recipient**

lehren 'to teach', *fragen* 'to ask', *abhören* 'to intercept',
abfragen 'to query'

➤ V of teaching (Abraham 1983: 51ff)

→ Focus of this presentation

4.1. Empirical study about learning issues with DC

➤ **Aim:** check difficulties with objects in German DC for Italian learners

➤ **Participants**

- 51 Students of Dept *Mediazione Linguistica e culturale* at Università degli Studi di Milano
- 3rd semester, proficiency level B1/B2
- Students have learned German DC with traditional manuals
- All tests on moodle-platform of University of Milano, work by themselves for pretest (and long-term posttest)

Pretest (Part 1)

- **Starting point:** collection of ditransitive V in E-VALBU
- **Test design:** build a sentence with word mix in italics (10 sentences)

(14) Peter und seine Schwester sind beim Kaffeetrinken: *erzählen – er – seine Schwester – eine spannende Geschichte.*

(lit. 'Peter and his sister are having coffee: *tell - he - his sister - an exciting story*')
→ ditransitive V

(15) Wir sind im einem Spanischkurs in Rom: *lehren – der Dozent – die spanische Sprache – die Italiener.*

(lit. 'We are in a Spanish course in Rome: *teaching - the lecturer - the Spanish language - the Italians*')
→ not ditransitive V, but ditransitive argument structure/semantics

Results of Pretest (Part 1)

51 Participants, 10 sentences Total 504 valid answers	Constructions	Frequency
Correct answers	285	56.5%
Mistakes		
- Wrong argument structure	97	19.2 %
- Wrong order of objects	19	3.8%
- Wrong case with dative object	48	9.5%
- Wrong case with accusative object	35	6.9%
- Wrong preposition	84	16.7%
- <i>Lehren</i> with Dative, ACC	31	6.2 %

Pretest (Part 2)

➤ Test design

- 10 ditransitive sentences
- Prompt: please express the objects in italics with pronouns

(16) Die Mutter hat *ihrem Sohn die neue Playstation* geschenkt. [DAT OBJ + ACC OBJ]

(lit. 'The mother has to her son a new playstation offered')

(17) Der Dozent lehrt *die Studenten die deutsche Sprache*. [2ACC]

(lit. 'The lecturer teaches the students the German language')

Results of Pretest (Part 2)

51 participants, 10 sentences Total 479 valid answers	constructions	frequency
Correct pronouns	251	52.4%
Mistakes		
- Wrong order of objects	124	25.9%
- Discontinuous order of objects*	19	4.0%
- Wrong case with dative	24	5.0%
- Wrong case with accusative	6	1.3%
- <i>Lehren</i> with Dat + Acc	37	7.7%

* E.g. (18) *Großmütter erzählen ihnen gerne ihm*
(lit. 'Grandmothers tell to them gladly to him')

4.2. DC with verbs with 2 ACC in grammar books

- **Helbig/Buscha (1999):**

abfragen, fragen, kosten, lehren, nennen, rufen, schelten, schimpfen, heißen

→ V with double ACC; no explanation

- **Hentschel/Weydt (2013):**

lehren, kosten, nennen → V with double ACC; discussed in section about 'Rektion'

- **Duden Grammatik (2009: 935):**

lehren, abfragen, abhören: with 2 ACC. OBJ.

Also *bitten, kosten, fragen, nennen, heißen*.

With lehren tendency to have IO in DAT, especially in passive

4.3. DC with verbs with 2 ACC in manuals



Das Haus kostete mich ein Vermögen.

↓ ↓ ↓

Subjekt Ergänzung Ergänzung

Nominativ Akkusativ Akkusativ

→ Einige wenige Verben bilden Sätze mit zwei Ergänzungen im Akkusativ, z. B.: kosten, nennen, lehren.

B-Grammatik B1-B2
Busca/Szita (2011)

Verben mit zwei Akkusativen

▸ Es gibt nur ganz wenige Verben, die zwei Akkusativergänzungen haben können.

Infinitiv	Ergänzung	Beispielsatz
lehren	AKK, AKK	Sein Vater lehrte ihn das Klavierspielen.
nennen	AKK, AKK	Er nannte den Journalisten einen Schmierfinken.
kosten	AKK, AKK (oft)	Der Umbau des Hauses kostet den Eigentümer ein Vermögen.
schimpfen	AKK, AKK	Die Fans schimpften den Schiedsrichter eine Niete.

4.3. DC with verbs with 2 ACC in manuals

Verben mit **zwei** Ergänzungen im **Akkusativ**

abfragen • kosten • lehren • nennen • schimpfen

Soll ich dich Vokabeln **abfragen**?

Sein Vater **lehrte** ihn das Klavierspielen.

Er **nannte** den Journalisten einen Schmierfinken.

Es gibt nur wenige Verben, die zwei Akkusativergänzungen haben können.

C-Grammatik C1-C2
Busca/Szita/Raven (2017)

IV Verben mit zwei Akkusativen

Regel ►

Nur wenige Verben werden mit zwei Akkusativen gebraucht.

Die wichtigsten sind: *kosten, lehren, nennen, schelten, schimpfen.*

	Akkusativ 1	Akkusativ 2	
Der Gast nennt	den Koch	einen Künstler.	
Die Wette hat	mich	100 Dollar	gekostet.
Er schimpfte	ihn	einen Betrüger.	

Dreyer/Schmitt (2012)

4.3. DC with verbs with 2 ACC in the scientific literature

Syntactic constraints for 2 ACC:

- Use of V in active or passive?
- Lang (2007: 5)

(19) *Der Lehrer lehrt die Kinder die Vokabel* [active, 2ACC]
(lit. 'The teacher teaches the children the foreign vocabulary')

→ ACC (*die Vokabel*) becomes subject (*die Vokabel*) in passive sentence

(20) *Die Vokabel werden die Kinder gelehrt* [passive, Subj in front position]
(lit. 'The vocabulary is the children taught')

(21) *Den Kindern werden die Vokabel gelehrt.* [passive, Subj not in front position]
(lit. 'To the children is the vocabulary taught')

- Zifonun (1997: 1084) (+ IDS-Grammar)

- Tendency to avoid such C and replace ACC for REC by DAT or PREP COMPL
- In passive C the ACC-Obj in the active cannot become SUBJ if REC remains in ACC. (Zifonun 1997: 1085)

(22) *Der englische Walzer wird heute die Mädchen gelehrt.

(lit.) 'The English Waltz is today the girls taught'

→ Need to check all the claims with corpus data

- First smaller study with corpus data by Lang (2007: 8):

Collection of 3678 exs with *lehren* in DEREKO ('to teach')

428 (= 12 %): 2 ACC

216 (= 6 %): DAT + ACC

But: still very tentative

5. Our study with corpus data

Aim: check if *lehren* (and other V with 2 ACC) used with REC in ACC or DAT

➤ 500 examples of DC with *lehren* in the corpus detenten20 of the Sketchengine

➤ *lehren*: 2 possible meanings

(a) to teach someone something

(23) *Die neue Lehrerin lehrte die Kinder das Stricken*

(lit.) 'The new teacher taught the children the knitting'

(b) to show something

(24) *Die Geschichte lehrt, dass nur in Friedenszeiten Wohlstand herrscht*

(lit.) 'The history teaches/shows that only in peaceful times prosperity reigns'

→ meaning (a) is relevant for our study

GRAMM. ANALYSIS	NUMBER OF HITS	CONSTR. DETAILS	FREQUENCY
2 ACC for REC + THEME	20		7.9
1 DAT REC + 1 ACC THEME	12		4.7
1 ACC for REC	9		3.6
1 ACC for THEME	64		25.3
1 DAT for REC	1		0.4
1 ACC for REC + subordinate sentence	39	,sie': 4 ,mich': 30 ,ihn': 2 ,jeden einzelnen': 1 Nomen: 2	15.4
CASE UNCLEAR (Pro ,uns'/'euch' or noun)	23	,uns': 20 ,euch': 2 Nomen: 1	9
CASE UNCLEAR (Pro ,uns'/'euch') + subordinate sentence	20	,uns': 19 ,euch': 1	7.9
PASSIVE SENTENCE	65		25.7
	253		100 %

REC in ACC:
26.9 %

REC in DAT:
5.1 %

Discussion

- Differentiated picture with possible uses and syntactic varieties (with subordinate sentence which functions as object)
- Most examples have REC in ACC (26.9%), but DAT is also possible (5.1%)
- In line with Lang's study (2007)
- Duden Grammar (2009: 935):
 - With *lehren* tendency to have IO in DAT, especially in passive
- Check this in the corpus data

Arguments in passive sentences	Number of examples	Frequency
THEME in ACC in active => SUBJ in NOM in passive	44	68 %
REC in DAT in passive	2	3 %
<i>In den Schulen/an der Uni/in Klasse...</i>	19	29 %
TOTAL PASSIVE SENTENCES	65	100 %

(25) *...ist das die Übung, wo **einem** gelehrt wird, ein Meister zu sein.*

(lit.)... is this the exercise, where someone is taught, a master to be.

(26) *Und weiter soll **ihnen** das Evangelium gelehrt werden.*

(lit.) And further should to them the Gospel taught be.

➤ Data show a different picture (>< Duden)

6. Conclusions

- Our study has shown that it is necessary to look at corpus data to get a **more authentic picture** of possible uses
 - Possibility to express the **REC also in DAT** which sounds more natural
 - Information about variety of syntactic structures, not present in grammar books or manuals
- **Consequences for FLT**: accept different possibilities from our students
- Our study is still very tentative and needs to analyze more examples to get a better picture
- Check other V with 2 ACC (abhören, abfragen, ...)



#40764423

sabine.deknop@usaintlouis.be

fabio.mollica@unimi.it

De Knop, Sabine & Fabio Mollica (fc. 2023), Ditransitive Argumentstrukturkonstruktionen im DaF-Unterricht.

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4.1. Empirical study about learning issues with DC

➤ **Aim:** check proficiency level of students with German DC with nominal objects

➤ **3 test stages**

- Pretest (Part 1 + Part 2): to check the former proficiency of students with DC
- Posttest 1 (Part 1 + Part 2): directly after teaching lecture based on priming
- (long-term) Posttest 2 (Part 1 + Part 2): 4 weeks after Posttest 1

➤ **Participants**

- 50 Students of Dept *Mediazione Linguistica e culturale* at Università degli Studi di Milano
- 3rd semester, proficiency level B1/B2
- Students have learned German DC with traditional manuals
- All tests on moodle-platform of University of Milano, work by themselves for pretest and long-term posttest

5. Teaching methodology

➤ Asset of CxG for FLT:

„schematic parts of C can be filled with different material which allows speakers to produce new structures. [...] learning of FL can do without complex rules.“ (Rostila 2012: 219).

➤ Applies to DC

➤ In psycholinguistics: **structural priming** (Branigan & Pickering 2017; Hartsuiker et al. 2004; Loebell und Bock 2003; Scheepers und Corley 2000)
“speakers tend to repeat the structure just encountered” (Gries 2005: 365)

➤ Learners hear or read a sentence, then they see a picture depicting another scene and they have to produce a new sentence for the picture.

➤ Design of a **lecture** (60 minutes) inspired by **structural priming**

1. Repetition of personal pronouns in German + Italian
2. Presentation of prototypical DC, with objects in color (but also different structure in spite of ditransitive semantics)

1.	Zu Weinachten schenkt sie ihren Großeltern ein schönes Buch .	
2.	Die Touristen fragen die Männer nach dem Weg .	
3.	Sie schreibt ihren Eltern eine Mail jeden Tag.	
4.	Meine Großmutter lehrte mich das Kochen .	
5.	Sie sagte dem Professor die Wahrheit .	
6.	Sie diagnostizierten bei ihm Krebs .	

5.1. Posttest (Part 1) directly after presentation

Scrivete una frase con le parole elencate in corsivo, facendo attenzione al caso!

1	Hanna war in Krankenhaus mit ihrer Großmutter: <i>diagnostizieren – die Ärzte – ihre Großmutter – eine schlimme Krankheit</i>
2	Peter ist sehr romantisch: <i>schreiben – er – Gedichte – seine Freundin</i>
3	Maria hat morgen Geburtstag: <i>schenken – sie – einen Rock (= una gonna) – ihre Großeltern</i>
4	Ich konnte nicht reiten: <i>lehren – Markus – das Reiten – ich</i>
5	Ich habe lange von Marias Eltern nicht gehört, gestern habe ich aber Maria in Supermarkt getroffen: <i>fragen – ich – sie – ihre Eltern</i>

Results of direct Posttest (Part 1)

51 participants, 10 sentences Total 507 valid answers	constructions	frequency
Correct answers	348	68,6%
Mistakes		
- Wrong argument structure	32	6,3%
- Wrong order of objects	15	3,0%
- Wrong case with dative	33	6,5%
- Wrong case with accusative	28	5,5%
- Wrong preposition	25	4,9%
- <i>Lehren</i> with Dat + Acc	1	0,2 %

Statistical evaluation: Results pretest – Results direct posttest (Part 1)

51 participants, 10 sentences	Frequency pretest	Frequency posttest
Correct answers	56,5%	68,6%
Mistakes		
- Wrong argument structure	19,2%	6,3%
- Wrong order of objects	3,8%	3,0%
- Wrong case with dative	9,5%	6,5%
- Wrong case with accusative	6,9%	5,5%
- Wrong preposition	16,7%	4,9%
- <i>Lehren</i> with Dat + Acc	6,2 %	0,2 %

t-test results:

- mean pretest 5,58; mean direct posttest 6,82; df 50
- $p=0,001 \rightarrow$ significant

Lecture (Part 2): pronominal expressions of objects

1. Ich gebe meinem Vater das Buch. Ich gebe es ihm.	
2. Ich gebe meiner Schwester die Blume. Ich gebe sie ihr.	
3. Ich gebe meinen Freunden den Brief. Ich gebe ihn ihnen.	
4. Maria zeigt ihren Kindern das alte Fotoalbum. Maria zeigt es ihnen.	
5. Die Eltern kauften ihrer Tochter das kleine Auto. Die Eltern kauften es ihr.	
6. Peter hat mir den teuersten Ring versprochen. Peter hat ihn mir versprochen.	

5.2. Posttest (Part 2) directly after Part 2 of the lecture

Sostituire le parole in corsivo con dei pronomi

1	Die Mutter nähte (= cucire) <i>ihrer Tochter das Hochzeitskleid.</i>
	Die Mutter nähte
2	Der Hausbesitzer vermietete <i>dem jungen Paar die neue Wohnung.</i>
	Der Hausbesitzer vermietete
3	Die Großmutter backte (= cuocere al forno) <i>ihrer Enkelin den Geburtstagskuchen.</i>
	Die Großmutter backte
4	Der Englischlehrer gibt <i>den Schülern</i> immer <i>sehr viele Hausaufgaben.</i>
	Der Englischlehrer gibt
5	Sie hatte <i>ihrer Eltern</i> <i>all ihre Sorgen</i> anvertraut (=confidare).
	Sie hatte anvertraut.
6	Die Bank hat <i>der Stadt das Geld</i> geliehen (= prestare).
	Die Bank hat geliehen.
7	Er reichte (= dare) <i>den Gästen die Hand.</i>
	Er reichte
8	Ich schicke <i>dir</i> bald <i>das Formular.</i>
	Ich schicke
9	Der junge Mann kochte <i>seiner Freundin</i> <i>den leckeren Kaffee.</i>
	Der junge Mann kochte
10	Kannst Du <i>unseren Kindern</i> <i>eine leckere Pizza</i> besorgen (=procurare)?
	Kannst Du besorgen?

Results of direct posttest (Part 2)

51 participants, 10 sentences Total 497 valid answers	constructions	frequency
Correct C with pronouns	423	85,1%
Mistakes		
- Wrong order of objects	7	1,4%
- Discontinuous order of objects	7	1,4%
- Wrong case with dative	10	2,0%
- Wrong case with accusative	3	0,6%
- <i>Lehren</i> with Dat + Acc	0	0,0%

Statistical evaluation: Results pretest – Results direct posttest (Part 2)

51 participants, 10 sentences	Frequency Pretest	Frequency direct posttest
Correct C with pronouns	52,4%	85,1%
Mistakes		
- Wrong order of objects	25,9%	1,4%
- Discontinuous order of objects	4,0%	1,4%
- Wrong case with dative	5,0%	2,0%
- Wrong case with accusative	1,3%	0,6%
- <i>Lehren</i> with Dat + Acc	7,7%	0,0%

t-test results:

- Mean pretest 4,92; mean direct posttest 8,29; df 50
- $p=2,02E-09 \rightarrow$ highly significant

Long-term posttest

- 1 month after the direct posttest
- With same students
- out of the blue and without any explanations
- With same sentences as in pretest
- Part 1 + Part 2

Results of Long-term posttest (Part 1)

- 1 month after the first posttest, out of the blue and without any explanations
- With same sentences as in first posttest

51 participants, 10 sentences Total 501 valid answers	constructions	frequency
Correct answers	297	59,3%
Mistakes		
- Wrong argument structure	60	12,0%
- Wrong order of objects	45	9,0%
- Wrong case with dative	34	6,8%
- Wrong case with accusative	14	2,8%
- Wrong preposition	46	9,2%
- <i>Lehren</i> with Dat + Acc	20	4,0%

Statistical evaluation: Results pretest – Results long-term posttest (Part 1)

51 participants, 10 sentences	Frequency pretest	Frequency long-term posttest
Correct answers	56,5%	59,3%
Mistakes		
- Wrong argument structure	19,2 %	12,0%
- Wrong order of objects	3,8%	9,0%
- Wrong case with dative	9,5%	6,8%
- Wrong case with accusative	6,9%	2,8%
- Wrong preposition	16,7%	9,2%
- <i>lehren</i> with Dat + Acc	6,2 %	4,0%

t-test results:

- mean pretest 5,59; mean long-term posttest 5,82; df 50
- $p = 0,611 \rightarrow$ not significant

Results of long-term posttest (Part 2)

51 participants, 10 sentences Total 506 valid answers	constructions	frequency
Correct C with pronouns	353	77,7%
Mistakes		
- Wrong order of objects	47	9,3%
- Discontinuous order of objects	17	3,4%
- Wrong case with dative	27	5,3%
- Wrong case with accusative	1	0,2%
- <i>Lehren</i> with Dat + Acc	2	0,4%

Statistical evaluation: Results pretest – Results long-term posttest (Part 2)

51 participants, 10 sentences	Frequency Pretest	Frequency long- term posttest
Correct pronouns	52,4%	77,7%
Mistakes		
- Wrong order of objects	25,9%	9,3%
- Discontinuous order of objects	4,0%	3,4%
- Wrong case with dative	5,0%	5,3%
- Wrong case with accusative	1,3%	0,2%
- <i>Lehren</i> with Dat + Acc	7,7%	0,4%

t-test results

- mean pretest 4,92; mean long-term posttest 7,70; df 50
- $p=1,44E-06 \rightarrow$ highly significant