

# Språkskap: Supporting Second Language Learning “In the Wild”

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## Abstract

Teaching second languages behind closed classroom doors means to ignore one of the most powerful resources available: language use in everyday social interactions in the surrounding society. Although modern language teaching methodology since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century has centered on language use (model dialogs, communicative tasks, role plays and needs analysis) the ‘wild’ and unplanned life in Language Two has rarely been employed as a systematic resource for the acquisition of the new language. This paper introduces a Swedish language design project that explores introducing temporary material and conceptual structures to support turning everyday encounters between Swedish learners and speakers into learning situations. Appreciating the social and situated nature of language learning opens for a whole range of actors, tools and environments to support the learning endeavor. We introduce pillars for extending learning support beyond the classroom setting into the interactions of private and public sphere.

## Keywords

Second language acquisition, social innovation, life-based learning

## 1. Introduction

Over the last decades, a new paradigm has emerged in language acquisition, which on the basis of very strong empirical evidence argues that language learning is essentially formed by social practice, experience, and socialization [10, 13]. According to this paradigm, children ‘construct’ a language in the interactions with their environment. Language system and language practice are two sides of the same thing. Adults, of course, build on the foundations of already acquired languages when they learn a second language. But they still acquire language in their social practice. Language learning and social integration into everyday life practices are depending on each other. For adults, language learning is a long lasting tedious everyday process by which they are paving their way into linguistic, social and democratic participation [3,4,5,6,11]. This understanding of the social environment of second language learning makes it possible to radically rethink the

ideology and practice of second language teaching and learning and to understand the challenge as a social and not solely a linguistic one.

This paper introduces design explorations in this new language learning arena drawing from a project focusing predominately on Swedish language learning outside of the classroom. By posing the question, how can Swedish speakers, businesses, and public organizations support learning Swedish as a second language “in the wild”, we introduce second language learning support as an unexplored arena for social innovation. In our case, we created a multidisciplinary team combining design research, design consultancy, Swedish pedagogues based out of a language school, and university based Second Language Acquisition researchers to not merely attempt to understand “the problem”, but rather to cast our gaze into a future by creating examples of how different actors can support language learning in everyday activities. We exemplify these possibilities at the level of encounters between Swedish learners and the Swedish-speaking environment, Swedish businesses, Swedish speakers and educators.

To introduce language learning as an arena for social innovation, we pose the question, what physical, organizational, infrastructural, conceptual concepts can support language learning in everyday activities? The Språkskap project is a multidisciplinary attempt to create inroads in this direction.

## **2. Welcome to Swedish**

Each country has its unique qualities that support and hinder foreigners to learn to participate “fluently”. By now we know that each newcomer experiences a country in their own way based on their own encounters, networks, and trajectories. Yet despite their circumstances, there are many common traits of being a newcomer in an unknown country.

Coming to Sweden not only means meeting a new language, but also coming in contact with a particular way of interacting with people. Foreigners often quite quickly experience difficulties “breaking the ice” or engaging with people in small talk in Sweden. The most obvious challenges for foreigners in Swedish society show up in comedy. The televised comic show Hip Hip takes up the issue in a sketch about a course for becoming Swedish (Bli svensk-kursen). The teacher states that Swedes are, naïve (naiva), punctual (punktliga), withdrawn (tillbakadragna), and afraid of making fools of them selves (rädda för att göra bort sig). While naïveté and punctuality do not necessarily hinder interaction, being withdrawn and afraid to engage do. Many Swedish learners talk about their difficulties socializing with strangers in public and private. They often contrast Sweden to other countries where talking to strangers in public places is an intrinsic part of everyday life.

On the other hand, language teaching is traditionally done in classrooms. Modern language teaching methodology has centred on language use: model dialogs, communicative tasks, role plays and needs analysis have been used to supply language learners with linguistic resources for their later encounter with the ‘wild’ and unplanned life in Language Two. Teaching second languages behind closed classroom doors means to ignore one of the most powerful resources available:

language use in everyday social contacts in the surrounding society. Making this resource available for language teaching has the potential to enhance language teaching and learning greatly.

Understanding learning as a pervasive phenomenon, happening in all types of environments in which human beings act, is a fundamental insight. It has spread through scientific fields and disciplines that are interested in human behaviour (e.g. 7, 8, 9, 12). Learning is a fundamental human condition. Interactions with humans and with objects in the world sediment as insights, understandings and practices that participants can draw upon in later activities. This is what we call learning. Human behaviour builds on previous practices. Whether trial and error learning to drive a Segway, whether observations how locals in other countries handle knife, fork or chopsticks, whether to welcome guests by kissing them at all, once, twice or even three times, how leave-taking is accomplished in other (sub)cultures than ones own, all this is experienced and forms future practices. Language teaching has not in any systematic way drawn on the rich experience which foreigners do in their everyday life with the language of their new society.

Mario from Italy was a model learner during his first seven months in Sweden: *I took five intensive 4-week courses at FU [the language school]. I focused all my time on learning Swedish. And when I have my goal, I am totally into it. At the beginning, it was a lot of time with the textbook. I then started reading the Metro newspaper. I watched TV in English and read subtitles in Swedish. The radio came much later. Now I am reading a book. I try to get out with Swedes. Fika [coffee] is perfect because it is one-to-one, so it is easy to follow the conversation.*

Looking on the other side of the interactions, however, are the people and materials that a learner such as Mario comes in contact with. Aside from a teacher's pedagogic efforts and a learner's ability to engage others, what resources are available for Swedish speakers to participate in the language learning endeavour? How do the businesses and public organizations support their patron's language learning? To gloss the service perspective, accommodating a patron's language and interactional level is the ideal. For instance, introducing signs and instructions in both English and Swedish is an effort to provide material in a comprehensible way for non-Swedish speakers. Many of the indicator signs on the metro, tram and busses in Stockholm are written in both Swedish and English. As a learner Silka complains, people in the stores respond in English even when she initiates the interaction in Swedish and speaks Swedish the whole time. What may seem by a business to be the most effective way to complete a transaction, or for a clerk what may appear to be the most friendly response, poses an obstacle to learners attempting to speak Swedish in everyday encounters. Translation to one's mother tongue or the *lingua franca*, while sometimes valuable for carrying on communication, predominantly post-pones the struggles inherent in language learning. In turn, the burden is upon the learner to create and uphold opportunities for speaking Swedish.

The Språkskap project has been exploring design solutions with Swedish learners, pedagogues, teachers, researchers, designers, and un-trained language coaches. The project name combines the word 'S', meaning 'language', with the suffix '-S' creating an abstract noun. It makes reference to words like 'landskap', "landscape",

as the social and physical landscape of the participants and ‘medborgarskap’, ‘citizenship’ as the social and cultural factors that make individuals social personas in a society. It also refers to words like ‘båtmanskap’, “boatmanship”, pointing to the abilities and qualities promoted by the project, such as inclusive attitudes and focus on linguistic communication between people. If in the future it were to be possible to ask about a company’s Språkskap policies as it is today possible when talking about non-discrimination or environmental issues, what could it look like to introduce these ideas? What could a classroom supporting learning in the wild look like? What could it mean to include the language coach, i.e., everyday Swedish speakers, and the physical environment of language use as resources for Swedish language learning?

### **3. Method: Design Experiments**

The project was organized as a *design research program* [2] consisting of a series of experiments such as “learning interventions”. Exploring new forms of language learning support could not come theorizing or designing alone, nor were teachers prepared for such a dramatic shift in thinking. Rather it required developing a future oriented gaze that incorporated a pedagogic, design, and process expertise through creating examples of what could be put into play. In order to stretch the boundaries of conventional teaching and learning practices and citizen participation, learning interventions ranged from very practical activities with teachers and students in a classroom setting to experimental activities in public spaces stimulating the interaction of Swedish speakers and learners. The design research program was organized through short-term activities, often with a small team and a guest organization.

Many of the activities involved participants from a pool of volunteer Swedish learners, a reference group of Swedish teachers, and the core team. We held seven 2-hour “drop-in” sessions based at a language school for a total of 22 learners, 5 project team members, and 3 language teachers. Nine of the learners participated in 3 or more sessions. The invitation was initially emailed to 500 learners. 40 learners attended the introduction session. We interviewed 12 of the participants, at least one time. Each session presented new activities and concepts, but also built on previous sessions by asking learners for feed back on what they had done in the “wild” during the week. Below we introduce a selection of activities with learners, teachers, businesses, and researchers as a basis for demonstrating inroads into this new arena.

#### **3.1 Scaffolding language learning**

To release the “studying of a language” from the confines of the classroom to “the wild” of everyday contexts requires complementing the role of the teacher and the classroom with new roles for other potential actors, activities and places. We look to the *scaffolding* metaphor to help us conceptualize Swedish language-learning support. Scaffolding for construction purposes refers to the material for creating a temporary structure that enables workers to reach places they otherwise are unable to reach. Scaffolding provides a temporary stable platform for workers to stand, hold their materials, and conduct work such as building, painting, or cleaning.

The traditional classroom has to date been the dominant “safe place” for learning language. Learners are provided a sheltered or protected environment guided by a trained leader to get introduced to different aspects of the language and to practice with each other. Much less has been done to extend the organizational structures of the classroom to everyday settings.

In relation to supporting language learning *in the wild*, we look to provide material and immaterial (conceptual) structures to enhance the abilities of learners to learn Swedish language by interacting with Swedish speakers. The idea is for the initiation and structuring not to fall on the shoulders of the learner alone, but rather to allow other actors to initiate and structure the encounter.

Svenskadax Card: As an example, many Swedish learners have a Swedish speaking partner at home. They are commonly challenged to speak Swedish together. As Sib reports, she tries to speak with her boyfriend in Swedish, but it gets frustrating and they quickly switch back to English. We created the Svenskadax (“swedish time”) card (see diagram 1.) On the front of the card, it states *Swedishtime* with a box to write the amount of time. For instance, 10 minutes. On the back it has a set of tips for Swedish speakers when speaking with learners.

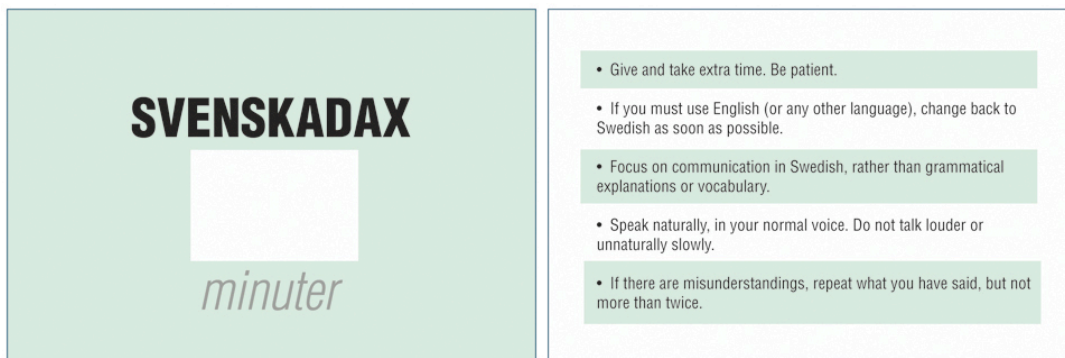


Figure 1: The “Swedish time” card

This activity can be initiated either by a Swedish learner or a Swedish speaker. It has a physical, visible component as an obvious marker for both learner and speaker. It provides a limited time contract between both that seeks to let the learner do something manageable, while at the same time allowing the speaker to know it will end. The tips are meant to provide basic guidelines and trigger reflection in how a Swedish speaker does speak to learner.

### 3.2 Design Experiments

#### I. Data-based design exploration

The Språkskap team held a workshop together with the Second Language Research Center (SELC) group at the University of Southern Denmark. We used data from a research project in Iceland as the basis for a workshop activity for prototyping new futures. A learner of Icelandic as a second language, while living in Iceland, recorded her mundane daily interactions for 30 minutes a week for three years. One of her early recordings came from a local bakery.

In the example, Anna, the learner, speaks to the bakery clerk while requesting items to buy and completing the sales transaction, predominantly in her low-level Icelandic.

The example shows the cohabitation of the business of the encounter (to buy baked goods) and language learning practices in the same talk:

- The learner secured that Icelandic would be used as the language of the talk although shifting to English would have made the transaction faster and smoother.
- Hereby the learner got leeway to formulate her orders in her own way although it took time and effort.
- The learner elicited words and formulations to be used in the encounter from the clerk.
- The learner elicited help to understand and produce new words and concepts. (For the analysis c.f. Theodorsdóttir, in press)

Around this interaction, we developed a series of design alternatives for how to support the interaction. We asked the questions:

- How can the learner be supported in her learning endeavor: both during the interaction, and before or afterward?
- How can the physical layout, artifacts, and employee training provide support to the interaction as a site of learning?

The workshop concretized three design directions: (1) materials and concepts for influencing the structure of the encounter between the learner and bakery worker; (2) technological platforms for the learner to easily document and reproduce the interaction, and; (3) time and places to attend to language matters.

## II. Practice Café

In Stockholm we developed a relationship with a local espresso bar for the drop-in session participants to engage with. Niklas, the owner of the coffee shop Fika Fika, prides himself on the personal nature of his café. Fika Fika is located close to a Swedish language school, so Niklas is used to speaking Swedish to learners. “They have trained me never to switch to English with them”.

Niklas has three framed photographs on the wall of sites in Peru that he says trigger and sustain conversations with his customers. He speaks so much about these photos, that he is tired of them and would like to refresh them with something new. “I wanted to approach the design school about making something for me, but I never followed-through on it.”

We created an activity for the drop-in session focusing on the practicalities of using everyday interactions as a basis for Swedish learning. During a session, we created the “practice café” that had a stand-up counter to engage the clerk and various two pictures to stimulate discussion. The learners used MP3 players to enter the café, engaging in a discussion with the clerk, while record their conversation. They then uploaded it to the drop-in blog to share with others. The session was also meant as practice for the learners to enter Fika Fika on their own.

The practice café exemplified the value of a venue for language learning practicalities, rather than merely a focus upon the language. In this sense, learning to enter a café and to initiate a conversation are not taken for granted, but rather seen as worthy of support. This points to a new type of Swedish offer that appreciates the social and situatedness of language development rather than overemphasizing the linguistic characteristics.

### III. Twitter Day

The team organized a Twitter day to support using Swedish as much as possible throughout one day in the context of each of the participants lives through real-time community of learners and coaches as support. The team hosted a kick-off breakfast in the morning where learners and coaches created Twitter accounts and tested it (attended by 6 learners and 2 coaches) and a meeting in the afternoon for summing up (3 learners and 3 coaches). In addition, the learners and coaches were asked to fill-in an online survey (4 learners and 1 coach). Of the 7 learners, 6 coaches who participated, there were 105 tweets during the day. We found four main categories of tweets (the tweets are translated to English for this paper):

1. Commentary about current activity:  
*"LearnerDario: A fox crossed my way when I exited the E4 close to Luleå, I love this landscape ☺"*
2. New language items with questions and answers about it following:  
*"Ladansabzian Todays word: I am a "sleepyhead"... hehe"*
3. Direct language questions:  
*"learnerMagda @coachkarlindem What does iväg- och igång mean?"*
4. Building social relations:  
*"Learnerdmitry Good morning! Don't like the weather... i really hope that Wednesday is "little Friday"<sup>1</sup> for real! Have a good day!"*

At the end of the day, the team tweeted that people were welcome to continue. During the following 10 days after the Twitter day, there were an additional 140 tweets by 6 learners and 1 coach. Activity varied greatly between learners. One learner only twittered once, while another contributed with 29 tweets. The following six days there were 11 tweets by 1 coach and 2 learners. While the tweets were consistent with the four categories above, over time the proportion of new language items increased. For instance, there were language items from a novel a learner was reading, and another learner asked direct language questions to the coach. The ebb and flow of Twitter activity raises the fundamental issue of the temporality of new tools, the role of the coach, and puts into question the idea of independent online language learning communities.

### IV. Structuring Daily Business

Aga, from Poland, walks into Ikea home products store. She and her language coach sit down on the couch near the entrance and speak about Aga's goals for the visit. Aga needs kitchen ware for her upcoming move to a new apartment and she would like to look at children's toys. With her coach at her side, and a prototype paper booklet to look at for reference, take notes, and to ask others to write on, Aga spends 2 hours engaging with various Ikea sales clerks in the kitchen and toy sections.

Maria works at Ikea in the toy-department. From her position, one day a woman comes up to her and asks her about child safety: Are the toys safe for small children. She answers that they are all "klämsäkra" (they are safe in the way that you can't get

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<sup>1</sup> Wednesday is seen as "little Friday". A day when you can party and have a drink, supposedly because farm workers had that evening off in agrarian Sweden.

pinched using them). The woman thanks her and leaves. A minute later, she returns with a language passport and asks Maria to write the word klämsäkra down. She does so and also adds an explanation of the word in Swedish.

We were able to leverage the structure and process of an Ikea store to stimulate language learning. Through a series of visits to Ikea and other businesses, we worked out two important structures suitable for supporting learners engage in such a shopping setting. *Sit, Talk, Sit* and *The Encounter Dial*.

*Sit, Talk, Sit* is a simple sequence for Swedish learners to engage Swedish speakers during practical activities. Before engaging with someone, find a place to sit down, and jot down notes about your encounter, whether preparing your goals or preparing vocabulary and sentences for an upcoming interaction. Engage in *Talk* by interacting with the Swedish speaker for the purpose of the task, whether looking for safe toys or ordering a pastry. After the interaction, Sit down again, review, write notes and reflect upon the interaction.

*The encounter dial* refers to different ways in which a learner engages with a speaker in an everyday encounter. A key aspect of turning everyday situations into learning situations is what the learner does and says once the speaker says something that the learner does not understand. To simplify, if we think that there is a spectrum from no understanding to full understanding, then what the speaker does is on a spectrum moves from “leaving without any understanding”, on the one side, to “staying in the encounter until full understanding” on the other side. We promote breaking the space between into four steps: Easy Out, Step-Out & Step-In and Full Press. Easy Out refers from the learner taking the “easy way out” of a social encounter by ignoring misunderstandings. For instance, upon misunderstanding what was said, the learner nods and says thank you and walks away. An alternative is for the learner to attempt to understand what the person said. Step-out and Step-In refers to the learner stepping out of the immediate conversation and then returning to clarify misunderstandings. This can either be a very quick sequence of stepping out and stepping in, or can be thought of over a longer period of time. This is often attending to language.

## 4. Output: The Språkskap Model

The project develops an approach meant to distinguish between different aspects language learning as a basis for better supporting language learning in the wild. It is based on three fundamental modes of interaction that we call: Pure talk, community building, and attending to language matters (see Fig.2). *Pure Talk* refers to communicative interaction between learners and speakers without attending to language matters. *Community building* involves (1) initiating contact with people a learner can access at his or her desire; and, (2) people that contact or initiate interaction with the learner on their own schedule. *Attending to language matters* is giving attention to how language works and figuring things out.

- 1 Linguistic competence: skill building (listening, reading, speaking, writing), grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation
- 2 Sociolinguistic competence (which language is used in different social contexts)



### 3 Pragmatics (the functional use of different language items such as turn-taking)

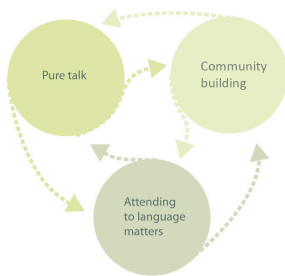


Figure 2: Språkskap model

Språkskap seeks to provoke the development of resources for stimulating all forms of Swedish communication between Swedish learners and Swedish speakers (such as strangers, acquaintances, friends; one-to-one or in groups) whether face-to-face talk, text-messaging, instant messaging, e-mailing, or phone calls. The model is based on the idea that a focus on communication (and refraining from attending to language matters during pure talk) creates a hunger for improving the learner's ability to communicate. This is done by attending to language matters in-between

pure talk sessions. The *Sit, Talk, Sit* builds this structure around the encounter, rather than replacing it. Additionally, the *practice café* demonstrates that the social and practical aspects of engaging in everyday activities demand attention, not merely the linguistic aspects.

The process of building a language community is the organization of pure talk situations in relation to attending to language matters. Building social relations is about creating and participating in one's Swedish community thereby developing ones' Swedish identity. Community participation involves both initiating interaction with people at the times a learner desires, and people who initiate contact with the learner at any time. The challenge for supporting language learning in everyday activities lies in developing tools that scaffold pure talk rather than replacing or refocusing pure talk to attend to language matters. We ended the project with a scaffolding kit consisting of both paper-based materials as well as digital.

## 5. Discussion

Introducing language learning as directed by interactions between Swedish learners and Swedish speakers and the Swedish environment begins to open language learning support to other actors. However, it is not a case of merely transporting the teacher-mediated classroom to the wild. Our design experiments embraced a new paradigm in language learning to combine a theoretical foundation with current structures in everyday activities to introduce new structures and materials for supporting Swedish learning in the wild. When we approached learners, teachers, and business owners and clerks, people often displayed an interest in better engaging learners, engaging each other, being a better support to language learning. However, there is a lack of practical resources for supporting language learning. The Svenskdax card is a basic example of the simplicity of scaffolding learning. This project has only scratched the surface of what is possible in language learning support.

We seek to call into action four main players: Language learners, everyday citizens, language educators and private & public service providers. We seek to open new research and business opportunities in a socially important area. By viewing

language learning as social and contextual, each of the main actors has potential to develop concepts and tools for their area:

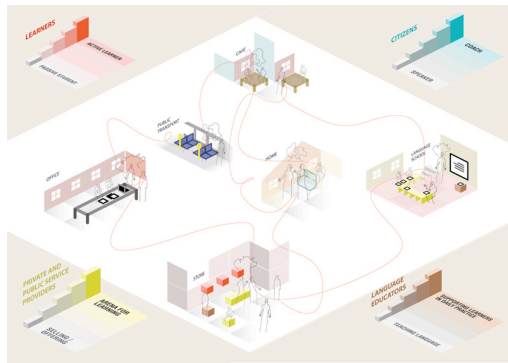


Figure 3: The Språkskap Arena

**Learners:** From passive student to active learner

**Citizens:** From language speaker to language coach

**Language Educators:** from teaching language to supporting learners in daily practice

**Private & Public Service Providers:** from selling/offering to providing an arena for language learning.

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