

Let's Give Them Something to Talk About:

Designing reflective support structures for SLA in the wild

KEYWORDS:

SLA in the wild; reflective support structures; interaction design; harvesting materials; interdisciplinary approach.

ABSTRACT

We introduce interdisciplinary reflective workshop practices as a design principle aiming at elucidating existing support structures as well as enabling design of future structures for second language acquisition (SLA) to bridge the classroom and the wild. We call for a collaboration between linguists, language teachers, volunteers, newcomers and interaction designers in order to maximize the learning potential in this bridging.

PROBLEM SETTING

Ever since Firth & Wagner's 1997 call for a reconceptualization of SLA, increasing focus has been on SLA outside the classroom [3, 4]. Recent research further emphasizes the need for concrete support structures to assist the newcomer's SLA in the wild [7]. This shift however poses a number of challenges e.g. shift in teaching methods; the impact of the lifeworld on the newcomer; and how to empower the newcomer to engage reflectively in the wild [cf. 2, 5, 6]. In this paper, we are concerned with the latter and seek to bridge classroom activities with those in the wild.

A REFLECTIVE PRACTICE: THE COMIC

Conducting a series of workshops with asylum seekers from Syria, Somalia, Iran, Eritrea, Ukraine and Afghanistan (all enrolled in a mandatory Danish course) and German university students studying Danish, it became apparent that the way we - as interaction designers - engaged newcomers to step into a reflective attitude, was a potential didactic tool in itself [cf. 2, 6]. Building on experiences from additional workshops with linguists, interaction researchers and interaction designers from Denmark, Iceland, Finland and Sweden [8], we propose a 4-phase didactic model, see figure 1.

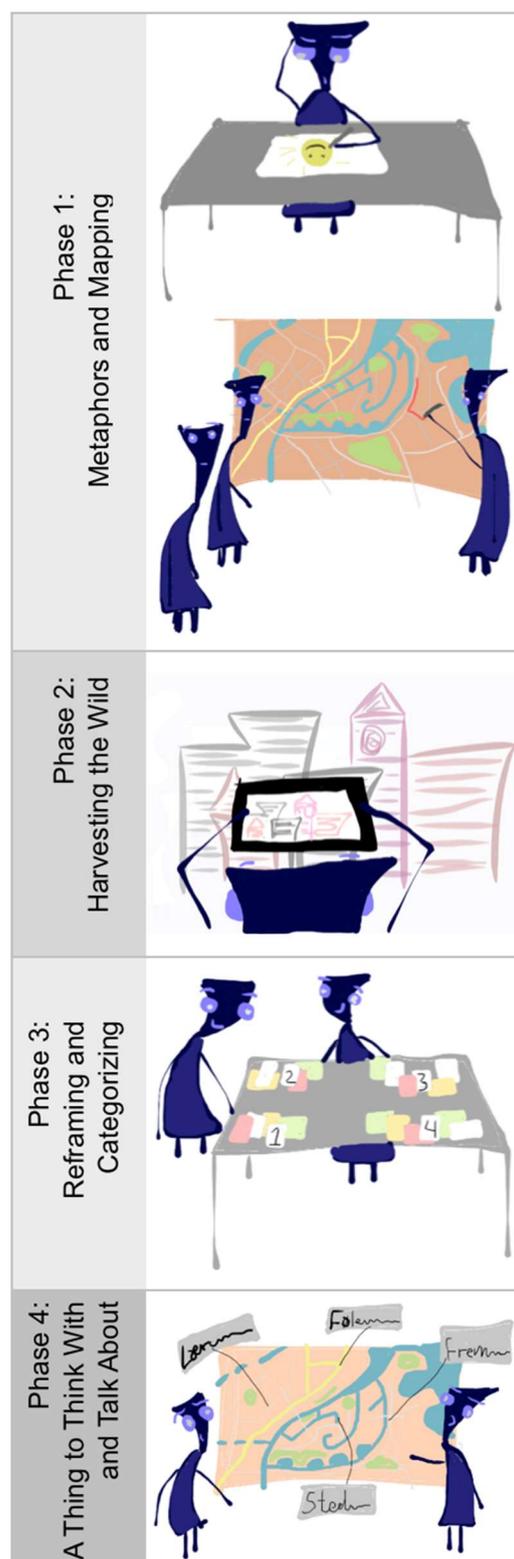


Figure 1: *The Comic*, a 4-phase model of bridging the classroom and the wild through reflective exercises.

Phase 1: Engaging in a reflective attitude

The initial phase (step one and two) consists of a series of reflective classroom exercises articulating participants' experiences as shared formulations and prepare the newcomers for engaging in the wild.

In this phase, an activity with metaphors (step one) proved particularly helpful in expressing emotions as they functioned as catalysts for joint discussions, which made salient the experienced effects of learning in the wild. Further, mapping exercises of the newcomer's lifeworld (step 2) (e.g. distinct places; artifacts and persons) assist in elucidating settings of interaction and locate problematic scenarios [cf. 1].

Phase 2: Harvesting the wild

These preparatory exercises in phase one empowered the newcomers allowing them to return to and look at the wild through a more reflective lens. Interactions, narratives and objects are then harvested through recordings of the interaction (e.g. service encounters, work place interaction, talk among friends), photographing, note taking or collecting objects that can be linked to specific experiences or words as heard, observed or felt in the lifeworld.

Phase 3: Reframing and categorizing

Back in the classroom, the harvested materials from the wild are made mutually visible and tangible for everyone to look at, feel, touch and manipulate. We recommend reframing the materials collected from the wild by 'disorganizing' them. This leads to a series of communicative sense-making activities where the newcomers try to negotiate a shared understanding of the materials by sorting them, inscribing captions and finally agreeing on domain relevant categories.

Phase 4: A thing to think and talk about

Expressing the experiences from the first three phases through a tangible product (e.g. a poster) aided in linking the newcomer's actual experiences with a variety of senses. The access and ability to fluently track, elaborate or react to each other's reflections thus seems to be important for supporting discussions and learning.

The tangible product (the poster) could ideally be made permanently available in the newcomer's context as a thing to think with; a thing to think about; and a thing to trigger interaction with locals and with other newcomers as a thing to talk about.

PERSPECTIVES

Incorporating design principles in and beyond classroom activities offers a new perspective to second language learning. By employing as method the comic as a didactic model, we argue that an interdisciplinary approach to SLA helps bring in focus the newcomers' own lifeworld in terms of 'real' language proficiency needs. The model further highlights the mutually interdependent nature of the classroom and the wild.

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