

North Sami for Beginners



Figure 1: Hanna Outakoski – Hanna Velde

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Background to the Course Concept

All North Sami beginner courses at Umeå University (Sweden) from Fall 2009 and onwards are distance courses and classified as distance learning. Every second year the course is given solely through internet and every other year physical meetings are arranged three times during the course in addition to internet meetings. In the course syllabus it is stated that the students should be able to gain good spoken language skills as a result of the course. In order to fulfill the goals stated in the syllabus, a need arose to find a common 3D environment in which voice chat was enabled and which could be used to convey different communicative and collaborative skills.

In addition to the goals stated in the syllabus, important ideological goals have also driven the project. North Sami is an endangered heritage language spoken by a small minority group in Scandinavia. Language is one of the most important identity markers of the Sami. Because of the negative and rapid changes in the demographics, the younger generations now risk losing their native heritage language. The Sami live scattered all over Scandinavia, in cities and places where few possibilities to speak or hear Sami are given. The hope is that this course will encourage the Sami and anyone interested in Sami languages to maintain and revitalize this heritage language. Regular meetings, where spoken language skills are in focus and that allow people speaking North Sami to visit the group, should in the long run offer a way for the otherwise rather isolated language speakers and learners to improve their spoken language skills and to find the courage to start speaking the language.

The final course concept presented here is the product of a project examining Second Life® (SL) as a possible learning environment on beginner courses at Umeå University, Sweden. The project is called *Språkens hus* ("House of languages") and is financed by Umeå University *Flexutbildningar* (project for promoting flexible learning). This course was also developed with support from the Avalon project. The Avalon project provided the *Språkens hus* project with the following:

- direct consultations with Avalon project partners about designing language courses in SL;
- training for the teacher of North Sami via the Avalon Teacher Training Course;
- access to teacher discussion forums and the Avalon Learning Island in SL;
- direct contact with some of the leading researchers working with language courses in virtual worlds;
- a broader more international dissemination context for the promotion and valorization of an endangered heritage language.

This document gives the outlines of the lesson frameworks which can be repeated and adapted to make the course longer, as is the case in the Course Iteration of North Sami 1, for example, where many of the concepts have been modified and expanded. We thus recommend that you also study the iteration description for a practical application of the scenario described. This can be found on the Avalon Learning wiki at:

http://avalonlearning.pbworks.com/w/page/33609878/North-Sami-1_Iteration

Overview of the Course

The part of the course that is given in SL focuses on practical language skills, such as speech, vocabulary, collaboration and communication. The more theoretical part of the course having

to do with grammar and phonology is taught partly in Adobe Connect® and partly as self-learning (course self-study materials are provided in the course LMS).

The language exercises and tasks in SL follow the themes in the course literature. The themes change every second week. The common themes are:

1. Presentation, friends and family, meeting people
2. The body, clothes and getting medical help
3. The reindeer and other animals
4. House, household, living, city and countryside
5. The map and orientation on a map
6. North Sami in films and radio
7. Occupation, doing business and keeping in contact
8. Free themes (students decide which themes they want to know more about)

The students can choose between two or three different tasks or activities per theme. A task can be, for example, a single problem that the students must solve together or it can also be an activity where the students visit several stations with specific exercises. Some of the activities can be done individually and at any time the student wants to, others are group or pair activities where the teacher leads the activity. Since the course focuses on improving the learners' spoken language skills, there are more group activities than individual ones. Activities with the teacher and a bigger group are organized once a week throughout the course.

The following aspects of language learning in particular are taken into consideration when designing the tasks and activities:

- how to improve spoken skills
- how to help the students to learn the course vocabulary
- how to actualize spatiality in language in a 3D world
- how to make the students feel part of a language community
- how to encourage the learners to speak out of own initiative
- how to vary the tasks so that the students don't lose interest

Requirements and Recommendations

Language Level: Beginners (A1)

Prior knowledge of virtual worlds: none needed for the students. The teacher must have basic building skills (such as creating objects, basic scripting and modifying objects) as well as some basic skills having to do with the settings and support in SL.

Recommended size of group: 10 students at a time

Target audience: University students, beginners, adult learners

Number of lessons: 8-12 virtual world lessons with the teacher; meetings between students outside the scheduled time are encouraged throughout the course

Virtual world requirements: for this course we feel that it is crucial that the teacher owns the land where the meetings take place or that she/he at least has the rights to build on land where the course mainly takes place. This is because lots of the material for the course has to be uploaded to SL and because the home area should feel like a dynamic place, where the environment can be adjusted according to the different themes on the course. In a case where

the teacher does not own land in SL, places like the Avalon Island Sandbox in SL are a valuable asset for the course.

SL objects needed: various objects depending on the theme

SL tools used by students during the course: voice chat, chat, giving and receiving objects and note cards, writing note cards, and optionally being able to create their own objects.

Course management tools: A Learning Management System is recommended to keep in touch with the students outside SL. In the course iteration, Cambro

<https://www.cambro.umu.se/portal> was used. Here meeting schedules, all tasks, maps and other material was provided to the students through their course site. Only the times for the lessons are announced on a blackboard/message board in advance in the virtual world.

Learning Goals

Language goals

By the end of the course students should be able to introduce him/herself, talk about preferences and dislikes, describe an environment, describe motion and emotion, answer the most common questions, ask simple questions, give instructions and understand basic instructions when it comes to finding your way from point A to point B, name things and common phenomena, and follow a conversation about a common topic in North Sami. During the course the students also get to practice reading skills and should be able to read short texts in North Sami with the help of a list of common words by the end of the course.

Social goals

The goal is to make the students feel part of the Sami speaking language community in SL and in real life (RL), create a group that wants to meet and speak Sami in SL also after the course, get the students involved so that they can visit forthcoming language courses and keep up the gained language skills.

Technical goals

No technical goals are set for students, but it is hoped that by the end of the course students feel comfortable moving and voice chatting in SL.

Storyboard

Each meeting in SL follows a theme that is introduced in the course literature. The themes do not necessarily resemble each other nor do the activities. Some tasks are designed as role plays that follow a manuscript but can be modified by the students or the teacher. There are also map quests where the students must cooperate in order to complete the task.

Reward Models

Several different reward models are used on this course. Each model depends on the task or activity and the goal of the activity. The following models and activities can be found on the course:

1. Treasure hunt – together with one's peers, follow the given leads and find the reward in the end (which may be a hot-air balloon ride, note card from the teacher or anything else that confirms that the students have completed the task).
2. Competition – complete a task as fast as you can, as well as you can, as accurately as you can or by following other requirements. Your performance is then graded or another reward is given.

3. Problem solving – solve a language puzzle together with peers or individually; solving the problem or language puzzle is a reward in itself.
4. Language and technical skills – the task aims at improving the students technical skills by instructing them in North Sami to build basic things in SL.

Technical Initiation

Already in the welcome letter that is sent to the students a month before the course starts, the students get to know that Second Life® will be used as a virtual learning environment on the course. The students are encouraged to explore SL prior to the course. The students should open an SL account by themselves during the first two weeks of the course and they are also given the links to teaching videos on Youtube that teach them the basics about SL in Swedish. The first meeting in SL is partly a self-presentation task and partly a way for the teacher to check that everyone has the right settings for voice and media. In especially problematic cases, technical initiation is done through the screen sharing option in Adobe Connect®. In this way, the teacher can take control of the student's screen and make the right adjustments for the student.

YouTube links in Swedish:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dfKAIY0_CQQ

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f-QXzZgrKJ4>

LESSON 1

Suggested virtual world environment:

Sprakens hus on Humlab II and orientation area on *Humlab I* in SL

Slurl to *Sprakens hus*: <http://maps.secondlife.com/secondlife/HUMLab%20II/205/72/25>

Slurl to *Humlab I*: <http://maps.secondlife.com/secondlife/HUMLab/128/128/26>

3D objects used: No other 3D objects are needed for the first lesson but the objects that make up the pair work area (some chairs and tables). The pair work area at *Sprakenshus* is the common area for the first meeting; this area is divided into smaller voice cells that allow the students to get to know each other in smaller groups.

2D materials used (slides, text, etc): Note cards that contain a profile for each student and a couple of empty profiles for those that have more advanced language skills.

Course management tools: any LMS. Only the time for the meeting is announced in advance on a message board in SL.

Aims

The first lesson has two main goals. First, the students meet the teacher and the other students and can start talking to each other in Sami. This first lesson follows a manual or manuscript, so that the students do not have to improvise so much in Sami. The aim of the exercise is to introduce oneself, ask questions and to find answers to personal questions. The secondary aim is to adjust personal settings, get to the common area in SL and start training in basic moving and communication skills and tools in SL.

Summary of Activities:

Specific activities are as follows:

- Meeting at the common meeting area in SL at *Sprakenshus* with technical check-ins.

- Moving on to the pair-work area where the students talk about themselves (according to the profile that was given to them by the teacher in advance) and interview each other.
- Students answer a questionnaire and write a short summary of the activity (outside SL).

This lesson can be repeated with the students adding and altering the information in their profiles, so that a) more students have a chance to introduce themselves to a peer and b) so that language skills acquired in this lesson can be applied.

LESSON 2

Suggested virtual world environment: *Sprakens hus* on Humlab II in SL

Slurl to *Sprakenshus*: <http://maps.secondlife.com/secondlife/HUMlab%20II/205/72/25>

3D objects used: different objects at different work stations.

- Station 1: objects that can be placed strategically around a conversational theme.
- Station 2: body parts and clothes that can be copied and then modified according to the instructions, message board with instructions.
- Station 3: interactive 3D objects that state the colour and number of the object in North Sami when touched.
- Station 4: dummy avatars that when touched describe themselves and the clothes they are wearing.
- Station 5: doctor's office.

2D materials used (slides, text, etc):

Station 1-3: power point slides used as texture on 3D objects that can be placed in a certain area and function as support for the students who at this station should engage in conversing on colours and clothes.

Station 5: note cards for the students containing the doctor's diagnosis.

Course management tools: any LMS. Only the time for the meeting is announced in advance on a message board in SL.

Aims

The aim is to use different stations so that the students can practice various language skills (see below). Some of the stations can be visited individually after class but the main goal of the lesson is to give the students a chance to communicate with their peers in smaller groups or more preferably in pairs in North Sami.

Summary of Activities:

- Station 1 - Conversation: conversation with the help of a manuscript on one of the boards. The theme is colours and clothing. The students can work at this station without teacher supervision, but in order for this task to be meaningful, the exercise must be done in pairs or small groups.
- Station 2 – Following Instructions: The pairs get to copy objects, create their own objects and then follow the instructions on the message board in North Sami. In order to succeed with the task they must help each other and they must understand the instructions.
- Station 3 - Vocabulary: this is the easiest station where the students just have to remember the names of the colours and then pair together right object number and

right color. This kind of language exercise can be done individually and without teacher supervision.

- Station 4 – Translation skills: At the fourth station the pairs get to meet a family of dummy avatars that can tell things about themselves when touched. Each family member has a story to tell in North Sami. This is a short story of maximum eight sentences. The pairs have to translate the stories and answer the question at the end of each story.
- Station 5- All skills combined: The last station is the only one where the teacher is actually involved in the activity. The teacher is the doctor. The students come in pairs and meet the doctor declaring their symptoms. The doctor then comes up with a diagnosis and gives the cure or solution to the problem to the student in form of a note card. The task for the students is to engage in the conversation with the doctor and to translate the cure the doctor suggests.

The students are given a description of the tasks through the LMS. Here the students also send their individual answers/summaries back to the teacher. This task is not graded.

Note that this type of ‘task station scenario’ can easily be adapted to include various language skills (see lesson 11 in the North Sami Course Iteration, for example in the Avalon Learning wiki site).

LESSON 3

Suggested virtual world environment: *Sprakens hus* on Humlab II and *Animal Island* in SL
Slurl to *Sprakens hus*: <http://maps.secondlife.com/secondlife/HUMlab%20II/205/72/25>

Slurl to *Animal Island*:

<http://maps.secondlife.com/secondlife/ANIMAL%20ISLAND/111/70/23>

3D objects used: message board with instructions and two 3D objects that give out slurls to *Animal Island* and *Sprakens hus*.

2D materials used (slides, text, etc): Map of *Animal Island* and the map quest are distributed to the students in advance via the course LMS. The map is also given to the students as texture in SL. The map quest or route instructions are given to the students as a note card in SL.

Course management tools: any LMS course site. In SL there is also a message board with instructions about how to get to *Animal Island* and back to *Sprakens hus*. The time for the lesson is announced on another message board.

Aims

The map quest is used to teach spoken language skills and the ability to give and follow instructions in North Sami, to start to understand the spatiality of a language that has a rich case system and a parallel system of adverbs and postpositional phrases, and to work on specific vocabulary (animals and nature).

Summary of Activities:

- *Map quest 1* where specific locations are shown on the map and the students are expected to visit as many of these locations as possible during a lesson. Students are expected to gather a list of words (such as names of animals) during their trip.
- *Map quest 2* where the students must follow a given route and find the locations that follow the route. The task is completed when all the locations are paired together with places on the map.

- *Map quest 3*: where the students can work individually and just follow written or recorded route information. This quest ends when the student finds the last location.

Observe that a similar task can be designed for virtually any island or location in SL that allows public access and that contains interesting sites or details that encourage communication. *Animal Island* is an ideal place for tasks that focus only on terms having to do with animals or nature. One should, of course, contact the owner of the location to inform them and make sure that class activities are allowed in the area. And in case that movement in the area is allowed but not voice chat, the alternative method of doing the task partly in Adobe Connect® should be preferred (see lesson 7 in the North Sami Course Iteration in the Avalon Learning wiki, for example, where a map quest of *Wonderful Denmark* involves students answering questions about the environment based on note card instructions).

LESSON 4

Suggested virtual world environment:

Sprakens hus on Humlab II or any other educational environment in SL.

Slurl to *Sprakens hus*: <http://maps.secondlife.com/secondlife/HUMlab%20II/205/72/25>

3D objects used: a virtual home or household with several different objects.

(see the North Sami Course Iteration in the Avalon Learning wiki for a picture).

2D materials used (slides, text, etc): none used in the virtual world

Course management tools: any LMS. In addition, the time for the lesson is announced on a message board.

Aims

The aim of the lesson is to stimulate the student to produce a written description of what she or he sees. This is also the only task that has a written product as a goal instead of focusing on spoken skills. The student is expected to write a description or a short story based on the environment that has been built especially for this task. The teacher has also arranged some things differently/unexpectedly in order to test that the students actually visit the home and do not just look at the photo of the home (e.g. the fishes are not inside the aquarium but swim freely in the house). Going into SL gives the students a new perspective when they find that they must think extra carefully about how to express space when they are in that space themselves and what things become interesting when the perspective is from inside the home.

Summary of Activities

The students are free to choose when they want to visit the home and whether they want to do it individually or in groups. The activities include

- a visit to the SL location that has been identified by the teacher
- a written report of the visit.

LESSON 5

Suggested virtual world environment:

Sprakens hus on Humlab II and the *Muinji'j Island* in SL

Slurl to *Sprakens hus*: <http://maps.secondlife.com/secondlife/HUMlab%20II/205/72/25>

Slurl to *Muinji'j Island*: <http://maps.secondlife.com/secondlife/Muinji'j%20Island/34/93/21>

3D objects used: none.

2D materials used (slides, text, etc): route information in form of a note-card and the map as texture.

Course management tools: any LMS. The time for the lesson is announced on a message board in the virtual world.

Aims

The same aims and goals as for the similar map quest above. An additional goal is to raise the students' awareness about other ethnic minorities and indigenous peoples. On this island a group of First Nations' members from North America have given "life" to a legend. Members of that community can now visit and follow the legend in Second Life® and outsiders can learn about their customs and traditional way of living in the past. A visit to this particular place in SL may encourage the students to want to build something similar for the Sami people one day.

Summary of Activities

The map shows six different locations on the island that the students have to visit in order to be able to answer questions concerning the environment and the legend. They must help each other to navigate and they should try to answer the questions together.

The special thing about this island is that it does not allow flying which means that the group has to walk in and through the forest in order to get to the six different locations. It is easier to get lost and loose a group in terrain with lots of vegetation and therefore the voice chat is a necessary tool in keeping the group together. The teacher can choose to follow a group and get their answers right a way, or the teacher can let the group to do the activity on their own and they can hand in the answers afterwards.

LESSON 6

Suggested virtual world environment:

Sprakens hus on Humlab II in SL

Slurl to *Sprakens hus*: <http://maps.secondlife.com/secondlife/HUMlab%20II/205/72/25>

3D objects used: A building or two buildings to be used as travel agencies, objects that can be used as slide viewers.

2D materials used (slides, text, etc): Three slides with conversation support, one slide with trip suggestions and two slides with photos that encourage students to make choices and talk about activities on holiday.

Course management tools: any LMS. The time for the lesson is announced on a message board in the virtual world.

Aims

Learning how to use the spoken language skills with authorities or while doing business.

Summary of Activities: The students work in pairs and get to prepare for a meeting with a salesman from a travel agency. There is no manuscript but the teacher can suggest which roles the students can have (e.g. a married couple, two friends, son and mother, etc.). This activity can be altered in any way desired and the pairs can meet anyone they wish. It is crucial that the teacher is skilled in the language and can alter the roles as required. Some alternative tasks could be a meeting at the airport, a meeting with the police, a meeting at a bank or at insurance company. One might also want to put more focus on business contacts and vocabulary.

LESSON 7

Suggested virtual world environment: students' choice in SL

3D objects used: none.

2D materials used (slides, text, etc): none

Course management tools: any LMS. No specific time is announced for this lesson.

Aims

Exploration of the virtual world for language consolidation

Summary of Activities

The students are encouraged to explore SL, travel in pairs or by themselves. The students should then fill in a "travel diary" where they say what they have experienced or seen during the trip. One can also aim at having a meeting in the online conferencing tool (*Adobe Connect*®) where the students can show their favorite places to the other students.

LESSON 8

Suggested virtual world environment:

Sprakens hus on Humlab II and *Annabellas 50s café* (or any other environment that allows for dancing) in SL.

Slurl to *Sprakens hus*: <http://maps.secondlife.com/secondlife/HUMlab%20II/205/72/25>

Slurl to *Annabellas 50s café*: <http://maps.secondlife.com/secondlife/Sverige/180/5/22>

3D objects used: Thriller dancer (music and moves to Michael Jackson's Thriller)

2D materials used (slides, text, etc): none.

Course management tools: any LMS. The time for the lesson is announced on a message board in the virtual world.

Aims

The final lesson is arranged as a good-bye party and as a final opportunity to practice personal presentations and greeting people. One technical aim is also to teach the students how to change environment settings in the virtual world. Another technical aim is to teach the students to receive an object (Thriller dancer) and to wear it so that everyone can participate in the dance. Students are also encouraged to continue meeting each other in SL even after the course.

Summary of Activities

A party where the lesson ends with a group Thriller dance.

Evaluation of Students

There is no scenario for evaluating and testing students in Second Life® provided here as students were examined in another learning platform in accordance with institutional requirements. However, as for any course run in virtual worlds, evaluation and testing can occur either in the virtual world or in other platforms or locations according to teacher preferences and institutional needs.

For more information about testing for this scenario, see the North Sami for Beginners Iteration page link on the Avalon Learning wiki at:

http://avalonlearning.pbworks.com/w/page/33609878/North-Sami-1_Iteration

For more ideas for evaluation and testing in general, consult the other Avalon project scenarios in the Avalon Learning wiki at:

<http://avalonlearning.pbworks.com/w/page/7682813/Developments-of-Scenarios>

Reflections

Anyone considering giving a course in a virtual world should always start by looking at the learning goals set for the students. The next thing is to look for suitable teaching environments or creating them yourself. Although building in SL is not extremely complicated, it takes some time to learn and more time to master, which means that finding good environments is to be preferred to building things oneself. One should also always remember that simple is not a bad thing when it comes to language learning. The students are learning a new language which is usually already in itself a very complicated process and distracting them with details or new technical skills in SL is not necessary. Another thing to consider is that one should try to create tasks that are not fixed in form to suit just pair work or individual work, but that are flexible or can be alternated easily. And maybe needless to say, some things can be done well in virtual environments whereas others can be done better in other kinds of environments or arenas. When we are trying to find ways to strengthen, revitalize and support endangered languages such as North Sami, then the potential of virtual worlds should in no case be ignored.

There were moments when the students praised the possibility of doing things *together* in SL. Some students were also very happy about the possibility of going to SL outside scheduled meeting times. All distance courses in North Sami have the same problem: it is impossible to find times that suit everyone, which means that some get better chances to complete the course, while others miss out on some important parts of the course. Making the exercises as flexible as possible can of course improve everyone's chances of getting the same skills, spoken as well as written.

Adaptations

The course concept can be adapted for any beginner course that wants to focus on spoken skills and that has a course material to which the themes and lessons in SL can be linked. This can also be a model for those that already have some skills in the language, but want to improve the spoken skills in particular. In the case where the students already have some skills, one can give them more freedom to decide on the discussion topics or adjust the learning material in SL so as to make it more difficult. This can be done, for example, by not including any translations on slides, note cards, scripted texts, or conversations.

For shorter courses, one or two particular exercises can be picked from the exercise portfolio. One example comes from another iteration of the Sami course: a three-day intensive Sami course given in Vaasa, Finland. Here the students were not wired up from their homes but sat in small groups at computers in a computer lab. They used dummy avatars belonging to the teacher and did a map quest on the Wonderful Denmark Island. They were only allowed to communicate with each other in North Sami. For this task no virtual world initiation was needed; the teacher just instructed the whole class on the basics of moving in SL at the beginning of the lesson. It was not so important that the task was completed but rather that the students were given an opportunity to talk Sami with each other. This has been the main

principle of the North Sami course all the time: communication in Sami is the main goal, not completing every exercise.

Those students that had slower Internet connections found the SL classes more problematic than those who had fast connections and good graphic cards. Letting the students participate in SL sessions through Adobe Connect® solved some of these problems. For example, this was done in the visit to *Animal Island* in a previous experiment, where some entered SL while the rest of the group participated through Adobe Connect® via the screen sharing option. In some cases this was even preferable to getting all the students inside SL. In addition, accessing SL via screen sharing options can be a very useful way of teaching pupils that cannot enter SL because of their age. Also this option was a good alternative for those students that could not participate in the lesson but wanted to watch it afterwards.

A final adaptation has been an experiment where the teacher took the shape of a male avatar with morphed voice and visited the class. Second Life® has a voice-morphing tool at a cost of 750 Linden dollars (approximately two Euros) which changes the pitch of your voice. This proved to be a very successful move in getting the students to speak Sami. The male avatar told the students that he came from a part of Sápmi (Land of the Sami people) where no Swedish was spoken and that he could only speak Sami and Finnish. He was also using his local dialect when he spoke. This avatar was of course only visiting the class when the lessons were scheduled and avoided meeting the students outside scheduled lesson times. The teacher wishes that she can use real people as help teachers on the course in the future, but using a dummy with voice morph can work in cases where no other teachers are available. The students were never told that the teacher had both a male and a female avatar. The teacher was also very careful as not to get involved in any personal discussions or discussions about the course. For anyone considering this option it is recommended that one weighs in the ethical aspects and the aspects that have to do with encouraging language use in the student group before using the dummy avatars as teachers. On this course the dummy avatar worked very well and got the students to try their best.