THE LANGUAGE HUNTER'S KIT

2013 Edition

LANGUAGE HUNTERS

by Willem Larsen

The Language Hunter's Kit, 2013 edition

Become Multilingual, Revitalize Endangered Languages

Willem Larsen

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to all the languages that have ever lived, and all the languages waiting to be born...

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1. Introduction

It's Friday, about 11am, and I'm sitting in the community hall of a First Nation in British Columbia. Morning light is streaming in through tall windows - in a grassy field outside I can see weathered totem poles standing, hewn decades before by an elder sitting next to me, and beyond the poles and the grassy field the ocean sparkles. There are several elders sitting here with me - one of which all the staff of the local indigenous language program agree is the most fluent in the community. She may even be the only one fluent at an adult level.

We're sitting around a small low table with a casino green tablecloth, a stick and a rock lie simply and almost zen-like upon it. We're "hunting" language from our fluent elder by playing a language game that consists of a simple conversation, and periodically looking to her when we need more language, or a clarification. We're doing this without any translations.

"Alqutax waya?" ["What is that?"]

"Waya noX aqoX" ["That is a rock."]

"Waya noX alii'Xii?" ["Is that a rock?"]

"Ang, waya noX aqox" ["Yes, that's a rock."]

"Waya yaagaX alii'Xii?" ["Is that stick?"]

> "KuGu'! "YaagaX alUkUX, noX aqoX" ["No,
> that's not a stick. That's a rock."] [1]

This exchange that we're creating, though profoundly simple, is almost completely new for the entire tribal language staff. That's right - even they can't have this simple conversation without the help of the fluent elder. This doesn't surprise me - on the contrary, this is so common as to be unremarkable, in spite of the competent, bright, college educated teachers that we at Language Hunters so often work with. Somehow, in language classrooms everywhere, and particularly for unusual or endangered languages, the ability to have a simple conversation is overlooked. Having a conversation as soon as possible is just not a part of the current language education paradigm. Students memorize songs, verb conjugations, and lists of nouns, but the ability to put together a sentence fluently in a back and forth exchange is very difficult to find (or achieve).

Suddenly, about 40 indigenous high school students walk in. They're frisky and seem unsure about why they're here. A colleague and I have been expecting them - hoping they'd arrive today. One of the greatest challenges in communities with endangered languages simply is getting people to show up. And young people are the most valuable players of all, for language hunting.

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[1] I've changed the language (this one is Unangam Tunuu, and written in an ascii orthography) to protect community privacy, but this should give a good feel for how unusual indigenous North American languages can feel to an English speaker.

The game now has to adapt. We split them into two groups of twenty, and have the local language staff lead the "What is that? Yes/No" game we just designed that morning.

Within about 15 minutes, 40 high schools students are chanting along simultaneously, having a conversation that hasn't been spoken by youth for several decades. Leadership of the game is now being traded off amongst the players - the high schoolers are leading the conversation now, passing it back and forth.

The fluent elder is sitting next to me again. The hall is echoing with a fluent conversation in the language of her youth, of family, home, and tradition.

"It's a miracle," she whispers.

I won't mince words - I believe Language Hunting is revolutionary. It breaks all the rules - even better, it rewrites them. Through a simple system of game play and collaboration, and a tight improvement cycle, it continues to teach me anew what is possible, opening doors that lead to other doors. The game is a little different every time I play it, and I may not even recognize it in 5 or 10 years.

Honestly, it's a bit overkill. In some ways it feels like putting a rocket engine on a stock car. Sometimes I forget to slow down and take a breath. I forget that it's not about speed. Focusing on speed can ruin games and paralyze players; paradoxically though, acceleration happens naturally once you stop thinking about it. I call it the "wind in

your hair" effect.

Endangered languages are dying at an accelerating rate. It's a terrible, global crisis. The maintenance of our ancestral languages correlates with a strong sense of identity, which correlates with social and physical health. Language loss goes hand-in-hand with drug abuse, poverty, and a myriad of other social crises.

And almost nothing has been working to address the language crisis; vitalizing endangered languages has been a nearly intractable problem. What few single methodologies that have worked have their limitations.

Language Hunting was born as the result of throwing everything we know that works at the problem - Total Physical Response, Signed Exact English, the ACTFL proficiency scale, Where Are Your Keys?, Spolin Theater games, Coyote Mentoring, Master/Apprentice, Communicative Learning, Language Immersion, Peer Mentoring, NLP, Appreciative Inquiry, Agile teamwork practices, Human Systems Dynamics, and on and on.

But more than a fancy pedigree, Language Hunting emerged over thousands of hours of game play, each game ending with questions - "What happened? What does that mean? What do we want to do more of? What do we want to do differently?"

By answering these questions, we continue to shape the destiny of Language Hunting, into a maturing craft of individual and community language acquisition.

An art, a science, the game at the table is our laboratory, and what we learn there can be taken anywhere as we

hunt language from fluent speakers in coffee shops, living rooms, classrooms, workplaces, and on the street.

It's difficult to teach Language Hunting with a book. It's rather like trying to teach Karate with a book. I know you can't learn to language hunt simply by reading, at some point you'll need to act. So I'm being very conscious of the goal of this book.

This book will provide you with the background, theory, and structure for how and why Language Hunting works. This then will be your springboard for action.

I want this book to inspire you to pursue this art, and to become a Language Hunter. With your confidence buoyed by what you've read here, I want you to play along with the online videos, run language hunting experiments of your own, create fellow players. I want you to track us down at Language Hunters, give us feedback, attend our community workshops and gatherings, donate to our non-profit organization, and join the growing community of play.

Our vision, the vision of Language Hunting, is a deeply multilingual world - where a 20 language child is an every-day phenomenon. In such a world, endangered languages will be a thing of the past.

2. The Life of a Language Hunter

You're walking down a cobbled street in a small town, somewhere in Italy. The sun is warming the front of a small cafe, and you see some men and women sitting at a table. They're speaking in a language you don't recognize - it definitely doesn't bear any resemblance to the Italian you learned for this trip.

You see a single empty chair, come up to the table, gesture at the chair, ask if you can sit down. They clearly don't understand your English, though they understand the gesture. A man stands up and encourages you to sit down by holding the chair and gesturing you to it.

They're smiling and seem excited to have a foreign visitor, but unsure how to proceed, talking amongst themselves. You choose two objects on the table, a full and empty cup, and you begin to hunt the mystery language that they're speaking.

In minutes, they're laughing and applauding. In a half hour you're having a complex interaction in the language, passing objects back and forth in what they understand is a kind of game. In two hours you are able to get the simple gist of what they're saying as they talk to each other, though you still can only ask and answer some very basic questions yourself. You're invited home with them, and spend the next week sleeping on different beds, in different

houses, becoming fluently conversant in a language that finally turns out to be East Central Friulian, a minority language spoken in Italy.

During your time here, on the side, you've also managed to quickly teach many of the children, and a couple adults, conversational English, through the same simple games you played with Friulian. They've begun to share these English games with yet other friends, in a contagious spread that you know has no endpoint.

You've made some dear friends and had an exhilarating week.

2.1 The Case for Language Hunting

This is the heart of Language Hunting. The free exchange of language ability, from person to person, fostering human connections, respect, dignity, and friendship.

Once you begin to hunt language, it's so infectious and natural, you can't really stop; becoming a polyglot, becoming multilingual, is more or less inevitable. It just requires running into foreign speakers with time, and though each of these time-scales - a few minutes, a half hour, two hours, or regular meetings over weeks and months - produce different levels of ability, the learning still begins right away.

Though I wish it were true, I don't believe everyone in the world will become a Language Hunter. I think of it as a kind of "mental martial-art" for language learning - if you look around you, how many friends, family, and

colleagues do you know that practice a martial-art? 1 in 20? More? Less? Language Hunters will probably become no more prevalent than any other practitioners of a skill that requires such passion and time.

Not everybody needs to become a Language Hunter, however. Almost anybody can *lead* a simple language game that a hunter has designed. And *anybody can play*. I've played with all ages, and all mental abilities. The game works; it only requires tweaking for different environments.

Those who master this tweaking eventually become Language Hunters.

2.2 How Do People React to Language Hunting?

It's the Agile 2011 conference, in Salt Lake City. This conference is for innovative professionals belonging to a particular subculture of software development. I've been invited to present a session on language hunting. I'm in the Great America hotel, sitting at a round table covered in a green table cloth, seeing if I can attract players while I wait. Though one of the smaller rooms, the ceiling stretches high above me, light pours in through towering small-paned windows, and a dizzying complex pattern dances on the carpet under my feet.

Across the table is Jonathan, a speaker of Parisian French. He has the broad smile and intense eyes of a mad scientist, and yet is thoughtful, kind, and cautious. He is

intrigued; he wants me to hunt his language. I ask him, "How do you say 'What is that?' in your French?"

"You say, 'C'est quoi?'"

"Alright...then, 'C'est quoi?'" I say, offering the black pen to him, pointing at it with my eyes.

"C'est un stylo noir."

We go back and forth, I hunt through Yes/No, and we pause. I want to make sure he's enjoying himself. "What do you think?" I ask.

"It's exhilarating!" he says with a smile, his eyes dancing about the room.

Later on I play with Ariadna, a Catalán speaker. She becomes so excited by the short hunt that she asks a bystander to record the exchange on her iPhone, so her mother can see the video. "This is amazing!" she says.

A Polish speaker named Kate sits down. She has been encouraged to come play by a mutual friend, I've never met her before. We play for an hour, passing a full and empty glass of water back and forth, getting deeper and deeper into the Polish language. I'm pulling other players at the table through it, bringing them along with me for the ride. She tells the growing crowd of onlookers, "they've learned more Polish in this short time than language students learn in several months, or even their entire first year of study! Polish is one of, if not the most, difficult languages." Kate grins and shakes her head.

I look at my fellow players. They're all smiling. I can tell they're thinking something along the lines of - "I could get used to learning everything this way!"

2.3 I Didn't Promise You A Rose Garden

Accelerated, deep learning is almost entirely woven out of the strands of the human heart, out of feelings. This should surprise you; our institutions tell us that learning is a matter of mind and discipline. Though mind and discipline do play a role, I have found that it is a relatively small one.

In fact feelings are so powerful, that when we do on rare occasions hit major obstacles, tears and anger often result, especially when it comes to the emotionally charged issue of endangered heritage languages. Here's one example.

It's August, 2009, in Ferndale, WA, on the Lummi Reservation, and I'm sitting in a newly built log-cabin style hall. We were on the second day of Unangam Tunuu (Aleut language) Language Camp, honored to have the help of Iliodor Philemonof as our fluent elder. Our partner Becky Bendixen, head of the NW Unangax Culture non-profit and Sngagim Axasniikangin dance troupe was thrilled after a day and a half of constant language games with a small but diverse group of Unangax - elders, preteens, teens, twentysomethings, parents.

And then it happened.

Through hunting Iliodor's language, we discover that the words for possession in Unangam Tunuu that correspond to "Mine" and "Yours" are almost indistinguishable to the English-minded ear. "MAH-yoon", and "Mah-YOONG".

We turn this into a language game, but I can feel the scattered conversation pairs breaking down. Everyone is confused and struggling. The room grinds to a halt. Where once was laughter, heads are shaking, people are giving up. Becky breaks down in tears. I tell her not to worry, that we'll get there.

"But what if I can't learn my language?" she responds, tears streaming down her cheeks. If she can't learn it, she can't teach it. The pressure is immense.

She was flying along, conversing, feeling hope for the first time as she was having real, fluent conversations in her language - and then the door slammed shut. All that success and ability zinging through her, and then complete frustration.

It's almost dangerous to open up such powerful feelings. But if you're going to language hunt, you need to be willing to experience this.

2.4 The Clash of Cultures

Make no mistake, this is a new kind of learning, bearing little or no resemblance to what students and teachers have previously encountered in formal or institutional environments - schools, colleges, much tutoring, and so on. As exhilarating as it is for some, it is frustrating for others. All the skills and habits of learning they have acquired so far, through honest hard work, need to be thrown out to make room for the radically different skills of accelerated learning.

New students often want to take notes, to translate, to have some familiar kind of control over the language game. It is possible to compromise the two, but honestly it does a disservice to expectations on both sides. Language Hunters will want the speed they are used to; language classroom veterans will wonder when they can stop playing this game and get down to the "serious work".

That's not to say Language Hunting doesn't belong in a classroom. It does, I've used it there many times with great success. But on its own terms, not as a compromise.

As a teacher, you just need to think of your students as fellow Language-Hunters-in-training. Unload the responsibility for becoming fluent onto your students as soon as you can. Learn from them too - teenagers have the potential to become the most effective Language Hunters ever.

As a student, you need to hunt what you're encountering in class for material to build language games to use on your own, or with classmates, outside of class. It's also possible to try to start a revolution in-class and convince your teacher to try Language Hunting - probably the best way to do that is to use it yourself to show its effectiveness before inciting a classroom-wide paradigm shift.

3. Where to Begin?

There are many ways to approach the craft of Language Hunting. I'm going to offer you five different starting places - I'm sure you'll get to them all, eventually, so just pick the one that you find most energizing.

One word of warning. There's a lot here. It may feel intimidating. I certainly think I would have been intimidated by this text, had I learned Language Hunting this way.

Nibble bite-sized pieces. There is no element too small to take on and experiment with. You simply cannot break Language Hunting - it's very robust. You will never stop improving your play (I'm certainly still learning new things every day); but if you never start playing to begin with...

So where to begin? Here are your choices.

3.1 Do It Right Now

Yes. Always my personal favorite option. Put this book down. Log on to the internet. Go to the Language Hunters homepage[1]. Choose a language (at this time, January 2013, your best bet is probably Irish/Gaeilge[2]), start with the intro video to the series. Play until you're fluent (or have questions), then come back to this book.

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[1] http://languagehunters.org
[2] http://vimeo.com/album/1766297

3.2 Look at the Big Picture

Part of this book is dedicated to offering a big-picture understanding of how humans learn, as individuals and groups, and how that relates to accelerated learning, and the global endangered language crisis. In the following chapters, 1 - "The Life of a Language Hunter", 4 - "The Flow of Learning", 5 - "Learning is a Feeling", 15 - "the Rules of Accelerated Learning", 8 - "Community Mosaic", and 9 - "Endangered Language, Endangered Communities", you'll find more about the theory of how the game works and brings communities together.

3.3 Look at the Details

Start with the nitty-gritty details of Language Hunting by reading "What Does it Look Like", "Ten Tiny Hunts", and "Applying the Rules to Language Hunting".

3.4 Read the Stories

Scattered throughout this book are short stories about our experiences hunting - our challenges, successes, and epiphanies. Feel free to skim this book for these vignettes to get an overall sense for how it feels to be a language hunter.

3.5 Explore the Science

In chapter 16 you'll find references to research that supports and illuminates the work we're doing. This is just a starting point; new research is emerging all the time about cognition and language learning.

3.6 Now It's Your Turn

Now it's time to make your decision. Best of luck, and remember, there's no one right way to learn to language hunt, just follow your nose.

4. The Flow of Learning

ENERGY ⟳ FOCUS
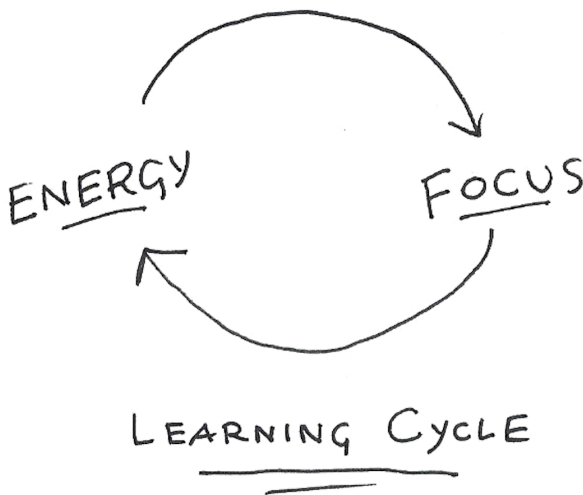
LEARNING CYCLE

The Essential Cycle of Learning Flow

The central theory of Language Hunting is that there is a core process constantly running in a learning environment. At its most essential, it can be represented as a wheel balancing two forces.

If you haven't already, please view at least portions of a handful of online videos, so that you can picture this

process more clearly[1].

Focus (the effort required to absorb new ability) requires Energy (upbeat, positive, active energy). Focusing uses up Energy, which you then need to recharge in order to continue Focusing.

This applies to yourself as a self-directed learner when learning solo, it applies to your partner when you're both learning as a pair, and it applies to leading group learning. You can manage the Energy and Focus in all these situations the same way.

There is, of course, a little bit of Focus required for generating Energy, and there is playful Energy you can generate while maintaining Focus. They aren't exclusive of one another. In the beginning, however, it will help to think of them as two separate forces you are managing.

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[1]See http://youtube.com/languagehunters for dozens of videos illuminating the Language Hunting process.

4.1 The Fluent Edge
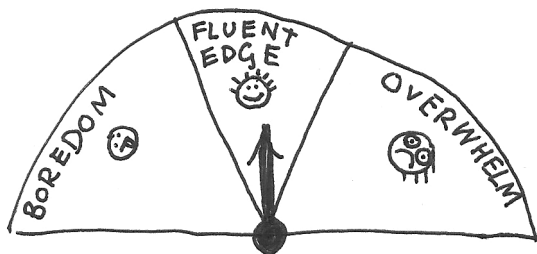
The place of the FLUENT EDGE

There is another kind of "flow" that needs to be mentioned here - what athletes call "being in the Zone," others may call it "complete engagement in the present moment." Mihály Csíkszentmihályi's book *Flow* contains a tremendous amount of information on the value of this "flow" state.

I call it *THE FLUENT EDGE.* Language game play has shown us that we can create, and maintain, this "flow" state by setting the challenge level of the game right at the place of *THE FLUENT EDGE.*

If challenge is too low for too long, boredom results. If challenge is too high for more than a moment or two, overwhelm, panic, and anxiety results.

At the simplest level, there is a feedback loop here. When bored, to increase challenge, add a new bite-sized piece of skill. If overwhelmed, to decrease it, remove a bite-sized piece.

There's another aspect to the *FLUENT EDGE* that may

surprise you - whatever new *BITE-SIZED PIECE* you're adding right now, is not the one you're truly becoming fluent in; it's the one several pieces back. There is a lag effect in building fluency - whatever you're taking for granted right now, whatever you're building upon, is what you're truly becoming fluent in.

This is useful to keep in mind - in order to solidify fluency in an ability, you must be using it to learn something else.

## 4.2 Managing the Learning Cycle
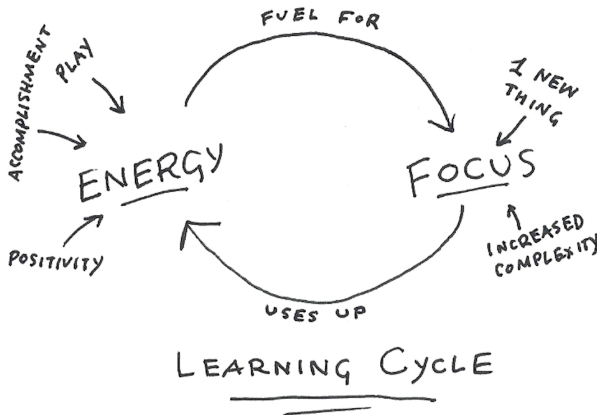
Factors of Learning Flow

Let's say you are about to kickstart your learning environment, and you are leading a group. If your group is excited and attentive you can proceed simply with the Focusing activity (i.e., adding a new piece of language to conversational play). But let's say it's not; instead, you notice that your players seem a little limp, nervous, reluctant. You'll need to first inject Energy into the system - through inspiration, play, positivity, silliness, group-connection, trust. There are many easy tools for doing this; ice-breakers, inspirational storytelling, children's games, and so on. I'm a big fan of the "Zip, Zap, Zop" kid's game, but any high-energy, physical game can work - if it's relevant to the target language or local community, even better. You may want to do some research beforehand to choose the best game.

Once your group is humming with playful energy, direct it into your Focus by beginning your first Language Hunt game. Being a "game," it has an energy generator built into it, which will extend the life of your Focus activity.

4.3 Looking for Feedback
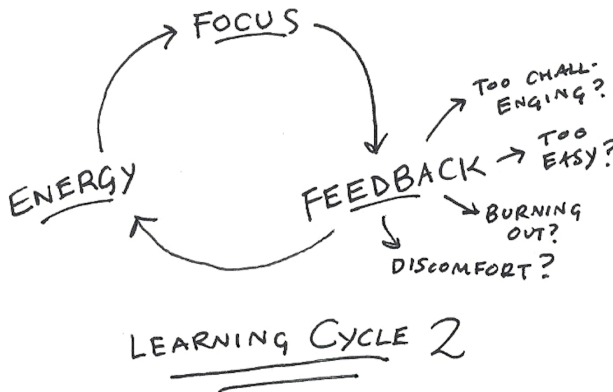

Learning Flow 2: Feedback

There's a missing element though; unless your group is composed of super language geeks[2], the energy generator contained in the game of Language Hunting won't last forever. Even if they are, you'll still want to be looking for Feedback on how and when you need to inject more Energy into the learning environment. Is the game too challenging or too easy? Is the room too cold, or too hot? Are the players mentally fatigued and needing a change of pace?

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[2]In accord with the rule *A FEW OF MY FAVORITE THINGS* (chapter 15), those with a prior interest in language study for its own sake will intrinsically derive energy from language hunting.

Change the game according to the Feedback. As soon as possible, you want the players themselves to take more responsibility for making these judgements by applying game rules such as *FULL, EXTENDED FAMILY, THE MEADOW* (again, you can find these rules and more in chapters 10 and 15), and so on.

4.4 Game Flow
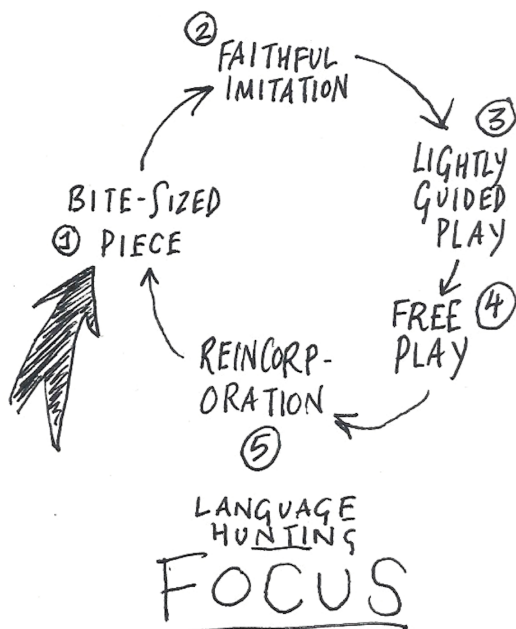
Game Flow - the Focus of Language Hunting

Let's zoom in on the Focus element. In language hunting, Focus is the constant addition and absorption of new *BITE-*

SIZED PIECES of language. You'll experience this game flow over and over.

First, you add the new *BITE-SIZED PIECE* of language, role-modeling it. Then, the fellow players faithfully *IM-ITATE* it, almost like marionettes whose strings you are pulling. You work around the table, using *MY TURN/YOUR TURN*, adding the piece into the current conversation and working it over and over.

You will be feeling out the moment when you can start letting go of such strict game leadership, transitioning slowly to *LIGHTLY-GUIDED PLAY*. This kind of play is marked by you nudging players to use their new found fluency, through signed cues and *PULLING THEM THROUGH IT*.

The players themselves will signal *FREE PLAY*. They will become frisky, taking the initiative, testing the rules, flexing their new fluency. This is the time for playing with *LINKED LISTS*, *2+ WORDS SAME SENTENCE*, and other language play (i.e. punning, tongue-twisters, etc.)

Before moving on to the next *BITE-SIZED PIECE*, and certainly before moving on to the next major conversation, you'll want to make sure you have *REINCORPO-RATED* everything that has come before. Each conversation should contain the totality of what you have already covered. Breezing through *WHAT*, *TRADING GAME*, *WHO*, *WHERE*, *HOW MANY*, etc, one at a time and in isolation, will simply fragment your fluency. You'll file all these conversations in your mind separately, and only combine them in a halting and hesitant fashion. Therefore,

make sure to *REINCORPORATE* early and often.