



All Ears English Episode 178:

Gaming Will Change How You Learn English

Gabby: This is an All Ears English Podcast, Number 178: “Gaming Will Change How You Learn English.”

[Instrumental]

Gabby: Welcome to the All Ears English Podcast, where you’ll finally get real, native English conversation with your hosts, Lindsay McMahon, the ‘English Adventurer’ and Gabby Wallace, the ‘Language Angel’, from Boston, USA.

[Instrumental]

Lindsay: Today, you’ll meet Geremie Kimaro and he’ll show you how to make your English-learning journey like a martial arts quest. Hi-yah!

[Instrumental]

Gabby: Hey, Lindsay, I was thinking that our listeners might want to see all the TOP 15 ways to improve their English, in an e-book.

Lindsay: I know. This is a great Tuesday series that we’re doing here to dissect and tune-up the TOP 15 mistakes that people are making, but if you want to see them all at one time, you can get them in an e-book.



Gabby: Yeah, just come to AllEarsEnglish.com/TOP15, that's T-O-P-1-5.

[Instrumental]

Gabby: Hey, Lindsay.

Lindsay: Hey, Gabby.

Gabby: How you doing?

Lindsay: Great.

Gabby: Awesome. So I'm really excited today because we have a guest, Geremie Kimaro, founder of Tic Tok Labs which focuses on gamified education. Hey Geremie, how you doing?

Geremie: I am great guys and really happy to be with you today.

Gabby: Great.

Lindsay: Thanks for joining us.

Gabby: Yeah, I think this is, this is such a cool thing that you do working with language learning, and (uh), apps, and, and gaming. I think a lot of our listeners love games and, (uh), video games or apps and so I-I'm really excited to talk to you about this today. (Um), and I'd like to ask you specifically how can we approach our language learning in a, in a game-like way so that it's actually enjoyable.

Lindsay: Important question.

Gabby: Yeah, so, so could you offer some of your advice about how we could think about learning, how we could approach learning a language, (you know), English, (um), in particular in a way that would be game-like?

Geremie: Yeah, absolutely. (I mean), that's what we're really focused on. (I mean), I've, (uh), I'm, I'm having a blast doing this. I've, (you know), I would – I've been building apps and games for ten years or more. (Um), I did it...

Gabby: Wow.



Geremie: ...(you know), for about ten years at a major film studio, (um), here in Hollywood and, and then I had kids, and, and really just wanted to apply a lot of, (you know), what I learned, (um), in, in with game design and game intelligence, and, and how humans are motivated and why games are so engaging, and sticky, and fun and so hard to put down. (Um), to me it was always a shame that most educational products didn't have those same, (um), (you know), psychological draws that, that best games do.

Gabby: Yeah.

Geremie: (Um), and so, (you know), and, and we as a company – and I know a lot of smart people in the Valley, (um), (you know), in Silicon Valley are really thinking about this as well – is that we believe in, in five years, (you know), when, when (sort of) everyone has grown up on an iPad, (um), that, (you know), kids just won't tolerate learning in any other way.

Gabby: (Um).

Geremie: The technology is there. And, so, (you know), it doesn't always take an iPad or a Smartphone to “sort of gamified” your, (um), your language learning. (I mean), people have been talking for years about, (you know), the most simple one is just study things you're interested in, right. (Like), I know a lot of people who – (you know), teachers and otherwise who've said, the best thing you can do, (you know), minus, (you know), a really good product that immerses you is just, (you know), pick up a comic book in a language that, that you're interested in or, (you know), if you like martial arts, read martial arts books that are in the language that you care about or, or magazines that, that focus on things that you really enjoy, (um), in another language. Because, (you know), for us, (um), there's a few reasons why people really struggle with language.

Gabby: (Uh-hm).

Geremie: (Um), the most that – to me the biggest one is just motivation...

Gabby: Yeah.



Geremie: ...that, (um), (you know), if you're not – it's, (you know), it's really simple, but if, if you don't spend enough time with something like language that needs a ton of repetition, (you know), it's – you have to be a genius to retain it, and so most of us aren't. I'm certainly not, and so for me it was always about how do I find things that I would do anyway, and I think that's what, what we're focused on, (like) bringing, (you know), content and music to language learning...

Gabby: Yeah.

Geremie: ...bringing game mechanics that we know have attracted millions, and tens of millions of people already to play...

Gabby: Yeah.

Geremie: ...(um), how do we sneak language acquisition into those things that people already find inherently fun, sticky, motivating, (um), and that they would do even if you took the language learning out of them?

Gabby: Wow, yeah.

Lindsay: Absolutely. That's brilliant. That is so key. Is so key.

Gabby: Yeah, and that, that really resonates with us I think because we, we talk about learning through doing things you enjoy. So...

Lindsay: Right.

Gabby: ...it's not just about learning English and being a linguist.

Lindsay: Right.

Gabby: But, (you know), actually enjoying something, maybe a hobby...

Lindsay: (Uh-huh).

Gabby: ...or, a sport, or whatever, (uh) through English.

Lindsay: Yeah, we like to get people on the show that talk about things like entrepreneurship or productivity, and...



Gabby: Yeah.

Lindsay: ...sports, and cooking, and just to take the focus off of theory a little bit.

Gabby: Yeah.

Lindsay: Put it on fun in life.

Geremie: Yeah, (I mean), (you know), the, the, the other – one of the other tenants that we try to, (um), hold very dear is that, (um), you're not gonna (going to) progress to a point in your language learning, (uh), until you can really talk about yourself either.

Both: (Uh-hm).

Geremie: (Uh), so many curriculums are, are about things that really don't matter. (I mean), I don't, I don't – I know so many people that, (you know), they take four years of a language in high school and all they can say in the new language is "This pen is black."

Gabby: Oh my gosh.

Geremie: (Like), things that don't matter at all. Not that, not that learning the word for 'pen' and 'black' isn't important, but it's not in context, and, and, and most importantly it doesn't, (you know), it doesn't allow them to talk about them, which is...

Gabby: Right.

Geremie: ...what 80% of most (convers-), first conversations you're gonna (going to) have in a new country...

Gabby: That's right.

Geremie: ...(um), is gonna (going to) focus on. So, (you know), the other suggestion is figuring out ways to relate your new language to you so that...

Gabby: Yeah.



Geremie: Of course you should learn the survival stuff, you need to learn how to ask directions, and order food, and, and do all those survival things and there's a lot of different curriculum around survival language...

Gabby: [crosstalk]

Geremie: But once you get past those basics, (um), (you know), one of the reasons why I think studying things or immersing yourself in things that you really enjoy (i-), is because you really enjoy them and so you're gonna (going to) – it's gonna (going to) be a lot easier for you to talk about soccer, or your martial art, or music, (um), in a new language if you are actually passionate about that and if you're immersed in the vocabulary.

(I mean), I, I took martial arts for, for 15 years and a few of them were Japanese-based schools and just, just, (um), hearing the, the, the ancient (sort of) language and the vocabulary around how all that stuff is described in Japanese, (I mean), that stuck with me forever.

Gabby: Wow.

Geremie: Even, even stupid things like – (you know), they count every, (you know), everything is counting in the new language...

Gabby: Right.

Geremie: ...and there's probably three or four hundred vocab (vocabulary) words starting and end in **[indiscernible 08:11]** and all of those things that just, (you know), Japanese teacher – that's, that's how he did it and so, I remember that stuff for life. (Um)...

Gabby: Yeah.

Geremie: (Um), so yeah, so I, (you know), I think, (you know)...

Lindsay: You were enjoying the martial arts.

Geremie: Point number one is just figure out a way to make it fun and that's what we're focusing on in terms of technology and games, and, and music and content. (Um), but also, (you know), focus on the things that are



interesting to you because ultimately you want to learn how to talk about yourself in a new language.

Gabby: Right, and I'm glad that you mentioned martial arts because (um), you also had mentioned, (you know), before we started recording about psychological levers and I imagine that being like, (um), you reach a new level, (kind of) like in a video game, you could reach a new level, but martial arts are often based on levels or belts as well. So I feel like that's, that's very similar to making your language learning, (um), like a game or you (sort of) try to reach a new level or a new goal. And I'm not just talking about literally, (like) reaching, (you know), a certain score on your TOEFL test or getting to that next English class. Although it could be, it could be that.

Lindsay: (Uh-huh).

Gabby: But it might be, (like), get to the level where you could talk about yourself...

Lindsay: (Uh-huh).

Gabby: ...in a, (you know), five-minute conversation. Maybe that is the next level for you or, (you know), make (um), make a longer conversation with a, a new friend, (you know), a 30-minute conversation. Can you talk about yourself and ask questions to your, your conversation partner and the person you're speaking with? Maybe that's a (kind of) way to get to the next level, (uh), level.

Lindsay: Yeah.

Geremie: Yeah. No, look – (I mean) games – (um), I have to admit, it's funny, I'm running a gaming company and I was never a gamer as a kid and probably because I spent so much time in environments that were – to use a horrible (sort of) cliché word now, gamified, (like), (um), (you know), I, I did spend a lot of time in, in things that were sports-related and martial arts-related and things where there were – that naturally, (um), surface up all of the amazing things that games do. And martial arts is such a classic



example because the belt system in martial arts is like the quintessential game design system.

Both: (Mm).

Geremie: (Um), it pulls all of the leverage you could imagine that are effective and, and (sort of), (um), gamifying something that's, that's education-based, right.

Gabby: Yeah.

Geremie: So, (um), (you know), if you look at the levers and (sort of) the belt system, it's, (you know), there's this very clear progression to mastery. (Like), you know exactly the steps that you need to take. (Um)...

Lindsay: Yeah.

Geremie: ...there's a whole status component to belts and martial arts, where, (you know), if you're a white belt and you walk into a class, you, you don't wanna (want to) be a white belt, you want to get to that next level and once you get to the next level, you really want to get to the (leve-), (you know), the next level. And there's this very, (you know), amazingly, clear hierarchy, (um) – (you know), the best games also employ something, which in, in (sort of) game design is called cascading information theory. So, they don't give you too much at once. They just give you new information in very small doses and then, and then once you master that, they go on to the next thing. And, and sports are really good at that as well where learn this one little fundamental...

Gabby: Yeah.

Geremie: ...and let's build on it, and let's build on it, and let's build on it. (Um)...

Gabby: Wow.

Geremie: ...so that's what we look for. (I mean), we, we really look at the psychology of learning and how do you apply things that games do really well to language learning and, and...



Gabby: Yeah.

Geremie: ...and so that's, that's the fun part because, (you know), so many games are so great at manipulating behavior, but, but there's no payoff at the end, right.

Gabby: Right.

Lindsay: (Uh).

Geremie: You either spent money or wasted time. (Um), we're trying to design experiences that keep you super motivated, but at the end of it, you, (you know), you'll know ten new words in your target language or you'll, you'll, you will have heard, (you know), in that one ten-minute session, (you know), you will have heard your new language a thousand times because it's so fast-paced. Then, (um) – so that that's the stuff that...

Gabby: That's great.

Geremie: ...fascinates us and that, and that we think is, (you know) – over the next five, ten years, is where, (you know), technology and education, gaming, science, it's gonna (going to), it's – (I mean), I wish I had this stuff, (you know), ten years, (you know), twenty years ago when I was, (you know), studying Russia in high school, (like)...

Gabby: Yeah. I...

Geremie: It would've been amazing.

Lindsay: I remember – so about 20 years ago, maybe, maybe a little more, but Nintendo came out and I really wanted to play Nintendo because all my friends were doing it and my parents wouldn't let me. So, they got a really bad rap, I think, from – m-my, my mom thought it was not a good use of my time because I wouldn't learn anything and I would probably become a hermit, just, (you know), in my room, not having any friends, and, (you know), not studying and my life would become, (you know), all about Nintendo.



But I think that's (kind of) the old way and now I'm really excited about games, (like), you're talking about you can learn so much. And also you can have (like) the social gaming where you actually do connect with people in this new way, and I think that is so cool.

Lindsay: Yeah, it's so important because learning doesn't have to be work. It doesn't have to feel like work. I think that's the key.

Gabby: (Uh).

Lindsay: Yeah.

Geremie: That's our motto here. (I mean), you hit the nail on the head. We, (um), we refuse to believe that, that if you – so, (you know), (i-) – there's a, there's a, (um), mantra in (sort of) in the Silicon Valley that, (um), that, that kids will turn away from games as soon as they know they're educational and we think that's been true because – and it certainly has if you look at the numbers. (Um), but it's because, (you know), most people who've tried to “gamify education” have taken things that are inherently boring...

Lindsay: (Uh-hm).

Geremie: ...(um), and they've tried to, (you know), put some lipstick on them, and, and try to almost con kids into thinking that they're fun with coins and badges and things that are just completely missing the point on the psychological reasons why games are fun.

Gabby: Yeah.

Geremie: We're, as a company, we're starting with things that we know are inherently fun, like listening to your favorite music and playing games like Candy Crush and we're figuring out ways to sneak the language acquisition in the back door of those things, and so it's not a choice – it doesn't have to be a choice between education and fun.

(Uh), the technology is there now to, to combine those two things. And so that's, that's where we see, (um), just explosive growth, and, and, and benefit to people because, (you know), people's attention spans are, are



so fractured and, and there's so many things competing for time and attention, and, and motivation, (um), and so, (you know), we need to go with that flow and build things that are, (you know), capturing people and their attention. And, and the way they're doing it today – you're not going to turn the top back, there's no way.

Gabby: (Um), yeah, absolutely. So it sounds like the most important (kind of) takeaway is, (you know), focus on what you enjoy and you'll learn through that. It might be, (uh), a hobby, it might be a sport, it could be gaming, it could be (like) a video game or an app. (Um), and for our listeners who are interested, could you tell them where they could find your apps and, and what you do?

Geremie: Yeah, absolutely. So, so we just released a new one, (um), that we're super excited about. It's called Pop Tok, P-o-p T-o-k. Right now it's in the iTunes store. It just launched a couple weeks ago.

Gabby: Yeah.

Geremie: (Um), and it's, it's essentially, (uh), a match-3 puzzle game. So if, if any of your listeners, listeners are addicted to Candy Crush or Bejeweled Blitz or any of those, (you know), really popular games out there, we've taken a very similar approach because we know that, (you know), the match-3 puzzle mechanic is something that's been around for, (you know), 15 years and people love it and they get entranced with it. And so we figured out a way that, (you know), help you learn a couple thousand words in a new language and it's actually in 11 different languages including English.

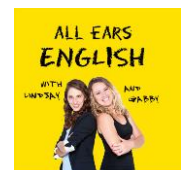
Gabby: Oh, how cool.

Geremie: (Um)...

Lindsay: Cool.

Geremie: ...and it's coming out on Android and Facebook soon.

Lindsay: Excellent.



- Geremie:** (Um), so we're super excited about it. Yeah, and, (you know), and, and (you know), company is Tic Tok Labs and we're gonna (going to) keep producing new products all the time that we think are inherently fun and figure out ways with our (um), (you know), amazing curriculum team to-to-to put some language into those things that are fun.
- Gabby:** Oh, that's awesome.
- Lindsay:** I love it. I love it. I think you're definitely on the right track.
- Gabby:** Yeah, and I downloaded Pop Tok actually, and it looks really good. So, I'm excited to play with it some more.
- Lindsay:** Cool.
- Geremie:** Awesome. And I think you (gu-), (I mean), I think, (you know), what you guys are doing, it's amazing as well. It's, it's, (you know), the, the democratization of, of, (you know), of education and, and all of these platforms and the fact that, (you know), you guys can make such a difference, with, (you know), such, (you know), a – such a light footprint in terms of – (I mean), you don't have to go raise \$20 million to start a company.
- Both:** Right.
- Geremie:** You can actually start helping people on day, day one.
- Both:** Yeah.
- Geremie:** Just, (you know), what you're doing, it's, it's amazing. And...
- Gabby:** Yeah.
- Geremie:** ...it's a great time to be doing anything entrepreneurial and innovative and, and being able to help.
- Gabby:** It really is.
- Lindsay:** Yeah, we love it.



Gabby: Yeah, well thank you, thank you so much, Geremie, for joining us for this episode. We really appreciate your time and it was great talking with you.

Lindsay: Yeah, thanks a lot for coming.

Geremie: [crosstalk] to you too. Thanks guys.

Gabby: All right.

Lindsay: Yeah, take care.

[Instrumental]

Lindsay: If you wanna (want to) put your ears into English more often, be sure to subscribe to our podcast in iTunes on your computer or on your smartphone. Thanks so much for listening and see you next time.

