

Ep 12: Developing for equality and building inclusive apps

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Drew Banks: We're able to look at going after these minority [00:00:10] languages because, for us, we can follow our heart, we can follow our values because it doesn't take that many resources to do this. That simplicity [00:00:20] and focus is key to inclusivity.

Daniel Farkas: [00:00:23] I consider myself a global citizen and this is the basis of my worldview that our market is a whole world.

Dirk Primbs: [00:00:32] We get to the point where somebody says, "Tamzin, you speak amazing Finnish, but is there a Korean accent in there?"

[laughter] [00:00:40]

Dirk: No one wants to be an outsider. Today's episode is about inclusivity. From big corporations to small businesses, and in our day-to-day [00:00:50] being inclusive is now part of how we work and live. What does inclusivity mean when it comes to language learning? How did one language learning app, Drops, bring [00:01:00] lesser-known indigenous languages to their users?

Tamzin Taylor: Welcome to another episode of *Apps, Games, & Insights* podcast. We are your hosts, Tamzin Taylor, that's me, [00:01:10] and Dirk Primbs. In this episode, we'll be discussing inclusivity in language learning, and we'll be exploring different ways that lesser-known and indigenous languages can be brought into [00:01:20] the mainstream. Joining us today is Drew Banks, Chief Customer Officer of language learning app Drops, and CEO and co-founder of the company, Daniel Farkas. [00:01:30]

Dirk: Buenos días, bonjour. Hello and welcome. Great to have you with us today.

Drew: Thanks for having us.

Daniel: Awesome to have you here.

Tamzin: Daniel, maybe we can start with you. Tell us a little bit about yourself. [00:01:40] How did you come to be the CEO of such an interesting and beautiful app?

Daniel: Yes. Everything started in a small Central European country called Hungary. I was born and raised here. Hungarian, [00:01:50] this beautiful language is spoken in exactly one single country, which is Hungary. [chuckles] I had to realize very, very early on that in order to have a decent shot at the [00:02:00] global marketplace, I need to pick up languages. I started to learn English and then picked up Spanish, and I happened to be a cognitive science nerd [00:02:10] as well.

I was really interested in the workings of learning anything the most efficient way. That's how I started to dig deep into the first principles of language learning. [00:02:20] When I picked up my second language, Spanish, I tried to find the best tool to nail the foundations of language learning and learning that specific language, but I couldn't find any, so [00:02:30] I left to scratch my own itch. We started to build a product that solves the problem of nailing the foundations of learning a new language.

Dirk: All right. How about you, Drew? [00:02:40]

Drew: Well, I've been in technology since the mid-80s, [00:02:43] since many of your listeners have been alive. I started by working with a statistics professor of mine [00:02:50] in a little bitty company that he had started in the Research Triangle called SAS Institute, which is now a global database company. After grad school, I moved to [00:03:00] the Bay Area and worked in Silicon Valley and all industries, hardware, enterprise software, consumer software, the app world, and in many, many different [00:03:10] positions from communications, to product, to marketing, to sales. In the last decade, I found my niche as [00:03:20] executive, usually the first non-founding executive in a small European startup, and helped that startup go global. I've really, really enjoyed that, [00:03:30] I love working with entrepreneurs, especially European entrepreneurs, for a variety of reasons I could go into, but that would be another podcast. When Mark and Daniel found me, [00:03:40] I was happily retired. I was ready to give up technology with one exception, and that was language learning.

I'm terrible at languages. I was trying to learn Spanish in my [00:03:50] retirement. When Mark and Daniel approached me, I immediately knew they had something special. Even though I was very happy in my retirement, [00:04:00] I couldn't turn this opportunity down. Two and a half years later, here I am.

Tamzin: Awesome.

Dirk: All right. Let's dive in then. Tell us a little bit about Drops. What is it? How does it [00:04:10] work? What is it about?

Daniel: Drops is the mobile app that uses engaging word puzzles with visual association and proven tricks of memory champions. It's basically a really [00:04:20] powerful language learning tool disguised as a game. Think of Candy Crush as a learning game. I think the big differentiator of Drops is that it's actually a game. [00:04:30] It's not just a thin layer of gamification sprinkled on top of a language course, but it's like a proper game.

We're also doing some gamification. There are some gamified elements within the app, [00:04:40] but it really is a game. We have a very narrow focus. We are only focusing on vocabulary because vocabulary is the building blocks of any language. You can start using [00:04:50] these building blocks without the glue, which is grammar, but you can do it vice-versa. You need these building blocks first.

That's why we decided to tackle this part of the language. [00:05:00] No matter which level you are on in your language learning journey, you will need a new vocabulary. Obviously, if you're a beginner, you need the basics, but as you go more advanced, [00:05:10] like even when you're fluent, you are picking up new vocabulary. We thought that this is a good area to tackle.

Tamzin: I actually tried it recently because my husband's Finnish. I was playing around, trying to learn [00:05:20] Finnish through the app which I have not succeeded to do in about 10 years. It is so much fun. I finished. It's really hard.

Drew: I have to say that was one of the things when Mark [00:05:30] and Daniel approached me, I was resolute that I was not coming out of retirement. Then I tried the app and I was like, "God, it's fun and interesting and unique." It is fun. It's just [00:05:40] so easy to play when you're standing in line or waiting in a bus or sitting at home as we all are now. It's nice to have a little fun.

Tamzin: I saw some really interesting languages [00:05:50] on the app. Can you tell us more about that diversity?

Daniel: I think it can trace back to the fact that we are only teaching vocabulary, the variety of languages that we are offering, and [00:06:00] the reason being is because it makes this product super scalable. If we would provide a full-fledged language course, like teaching grammar and conversation, we wouldn't be able to scale [00:06:10] in such a wide area of languages.

Vocabulary is fairly simple. We basically have one single person responsible for content within [00:06:20] the Drops team. We are a small and really, really powerful team. This vocabulary focus enables us- we have- approaching 43, currently, we are teaching 42 languages. [00:06:30] We are adding a new offering almost every single month. There are some really exotic languages. Of course, we started with the usual suspects, the mainstream, most popular languages like French, [00:06:40] English, German, Italian, and Spanish. Then we started to experiment with more exotic languages like Asian languages, such as Mandarin Chinese, Japanese, [00:06:50] Korean, Cantonese Chinese. Then we ventured into some really esoteric languages such as Icelandic and then it proved to be a hit. [00:07:00] We just introduced recently a very very exciting language called Ainu which is an indigenous language in the northern island of Hokkaidō [00:07:10] and it's spoken by very, very few native speakers and we are adding more in the future.

Drew: Tamzin, I think you were also talking about our additional apps. Most language apps [00:07:20] when they decide to expand the language learning journey, they move forward in that journey. They go from beginner language learners to intermediate language learners who start adding [00:07:30] grammar and more complex grammar. We actually went the other way.

We knew what we had in the simplicity of the app. When we decided to expand our market, we went [00:07:40] backward to alphabets. Scripts is about teaching alphabets and character-based language systems. If you're learning a language that's not in your own alphabet, that's [00:07:50] where you need to start. Once we had that in place, we're like, "These are not just apps for adult language learners. There are kids as Dani's story-" [00:08:00] Dani, by the way, is Daniel's nickname, as his story illustrates, children often have to learn multiple languages when they are growing up. We thought, "Oh why don't we [00:08:10] create Drops for kids and families?" That's how we created Droplets.

Tamzin: Excellent. How do you know which language to branch out to? Coming back to, is it Inu, [00:08:20] Ainu?

Drew: Ainu.

Tamzin: Ainu. How did you make the decision to expand to that language?

Drew: I'm going to back up a little bit from Ainu. Daniel had mentioned that we had launched Icelandic and Icelandic was really [00:08:30] a powerful language for us. The next language we launched was Hawaiian which- we didn't know it at the time, but it was a fairly endangered language in the 60s, it almost went [00:08:40] extinct. It was an incredible journey for us and the employees in their company to feel like we were helping the revivalists, that we're trying to revive the language. We reached out to [00:08:50] organizations that were trying to revive Hawaiian. In that process, we found out that the UN had named 2019 the Year of [00:09:00] Indigenous Languages and we were like, "Wow, we are having so much fun doing this. We are having so much success doing this."

Why don't we continue doing it?" We launched [00:09:10] Māori and Samoan, and then the UN organization reached out to us because they saw that we were launching these indigenous languages and they were like, "Would you co-launch [00:09:20] a language with us? Would you co-launch an indigenous language?" We were like, "Sure, we'd love to." Then we worked out what language we will work on.

We suggested Ainu because [00:09:30] Drops is super popular in Asian languages probably because of the visual nature of Drops, it's really great for character-based languages. We [00:09:40] did some research and found this extremely endangered language. Ainu is- there are only around 15 people that know it well enough to teach it. Only a handful of people speak it and the UN organization was thrilled by the choice and then we worked together to launch it.

Dirk: How would you approach this? Is then one of you traveling there [00:10:00] and learning that language, or are you finding one of the very few teachers and try to capture the knowledge into your app?

Drew: Always the latter, and especially [00:10:10] with indigenous languages, the first and foremost thing we need to do is find an expert in that language. We can't pretend to know what's important for those languages. We [00:10:20] search really hard to get the right translator and the right voice-over artist. That's especially important in indigenous languages.

We also search to find the [00:10:30] organization that's trying to revive the language because we know we can't do that by ourselves. In Ainu, those two things came together as one because the University of Hokkaidō, [00:10:40] the one professor of Ainu in the world, I think, teaches at this university, which is the university responsible for reviving the language. [00:10:50] We were able to contact him and get him on board. We were also- in part to answer your question, we usually do not travel to the countries to [00:11:00] record a language, that's a great expense, but we did with Ainu because, again, with an indigenous language, there's a cultural element that's really [00:11:10] important.

We knew that traveling there and watching the translation sessions and voice-over sessions was very important for the people, [00:11:20] we're the only digital instance of Ainu in the world that we know of. They were very, very proud to do this, and we knew we had to be a part of it. We bit the bullet and flew [00:11:30] our content personnel there who spent the whole time with both the translator and voiceover artist.

Tamzin: What an opportunity to travel there and experience first-hand, someone [00:11:40] trying to share a language which is so endangered.

Drew: First off, this person loves Asian languages even though she's Hungarian. She spent a few years in Korea, and for [00:11:50] her, it was an amazing experience. She came back glowing, learning a bit of the language herself, it was an amazing experience for her.

Dirk: Who would then go ahead and [00:12:00] learn that language? Is it people that are from that cultural background already, or is it visitors, or is it scholars? Especially when it comes to such rare [00:12:10] indigenous languages, who are usually building those tools for them?

Drew: It differs by language. Because we were working with the UN, we were very careful in some of the [00:12:20] selection process, or the selection criteria for Ainu. One of the

things that we discovered in looking at the possibilities was, the Japanese government had recently [00:12:30] recognized the Ainu people, and were supportive of the revitalization of Ainu.

Knowing that the government was involved was very helpful in choosing it. [00:12:40] The government being involved, they started building a museum dedicated to the Ainu culture, and Ainu language which Hokkaidō University is involved in. [00:12:50] That narrowed our choice. A big part of the answer to your question is, if we were teaching a full comprehensive language course, there would be very few [00:13:00] people that are looking to learn Ainu, incredibly few.

The cost justification probably wouldn't have made sense, but we're a vocabulary teaching app. [00:13:10] While there are not a lot of people that are looking to learn the entire language, there are a lot of people that want to know about the language, and maybe learn a few words in the language, [00:13:20] and maybe come across a museum exhibit while they're visiting the island of Hokkaidō that demonstrates the language.

For us, it made a lot of sense. [00:13:30] We don't have to know that there are a ton of people looking to learn the language. We just need to know that there are a lot of people interested in knowing about language and that expands [00:13:40] the market dramatically.

Daniel: I just want to add one more thing is that one of the top three motivations of our users is their learning for intellectual curiosity. [00:13:50] They are not learning for practical reasons. They just love languages. Any language that you're introducing, there are going to be a bunch of our active users who are going to jump on it [00:14:00] and pick up even just a few words.

Tamzin: That's fascinating. Moving back to the core of the topic on inclusivity, I had a question for you, Daniel. What does building inclusive products mean [00:14:10] for you in the context of Drops?

Daniel: That's a great question. I would say, I think we are generally very open-minded people, not afraid of [00:14:20] experimenting, serving the needs of a variety of people, and our company culture, building philosophies, is also related to this, [00:14:30] this open approach. If you're a remote company, our team members are all over Europe and are some team members even from the US.

I consider myself as a global [00:14:40] citizen. This is the basis of my worldview, that our market is the whole world, and it being our language learning application, we are trying to cover [00:14:50] as much languages and as much area basically, even geographical area as possible. I don't know how many more languages are we going to add into Drops, [00:15:00] we have started to cover the whole of the world map slowly. Maybe in the future, we are. In the upcoming year, we are going to venture into a whole new continent that is underserved, but, yes, that's a story [00:15:10] for the future.

Drew: I'll put my business hat on to answer that. For me, it's about keeping the products simple and focused. As I mentioned earlier, we couldn't have [00:15:20] done Ainu. We couldn't have done many of our indigenous languages if we were a full-fledged comprehensive language app, but because we are so focused on vocabulary and alphabets, [00:15:30] we are able to do and expand in ways that other language apps can't.

We are able to look at going after these minority languages [00:15:40] because for us, we can follow our heart, we can follow our values because it doesn't take that many resources to do this. That simplicity and focus [00:15:50] is key to inclusivity.

Dirk: You said people learn the languages out of intellectual curiosity. Any efforts you make to allow people [00:16:00] to use your app and embrace languages that may otherwise be more excluded? Any thoughts of going into accessibility, for instance? I don't know in how many flavors [00:16:10] you can learn a language. Is there any of this built-in as well?

Drew: Well, I will start and Daniel will probably have a lot more to say. I think the fact that we are a game [00:16:20] and we are a highly visual, beautiful, fun game and that you can get a lot out of just five minutes, this game expands [00:16:30] our market dramatically, expands our inclusivity dramatically. Also, we are freemium. Anyone can jump in and use Drops for [00:16:40] five minutes a day free. That economic inclusivity is huge. Those would be the two things I would answer that question with.

Daniel: Accessibility is key for us. [00:16:50] Language learning is a big endeavor. When you're starting a whole new language, especially if the writing system is so much different than your native language, it can be super [00:17:00] intimidating. One of the goals of Drops is to make it look easy, at least easy to start, basically providing a gateway drug of some sort to start a journey, [00:17:10] and as you gain momentum, it's so much easier to get more serious. Also, the UI itself is purposefully designed to be ridiculously accessible.

I mean, users from 5 [00:17:20] until 100 years old, the UI is so intuitive, anyone can start using it without any instructions. You don't need digital literacy to [00:17:30] start using it and you join Drops. That's what we're hearing back from our users, that they are playing together with their kids and even with their grandparents.

Tamzin: I can definitely agree with you there. [00:17:40] It's a really beautiful experience to drag and drop and match the words with images. I think my husband could hear me practicing the words from his study. He would probably wonder what I was doing later on, but how do you go about testing your [00:17:50] products for inclusivity?

Daniel: This is a tricky one. First of all, we are relying heavily on the feedback of the experts that we are working on, people like [00:18:00] the translators, the proofreaders, the voice talents who we are hiring because they have the insider knowledge. They are providing great intel for us. Of course, after launching the product, [00:18:10] we are listening very, very closely to the feedback of our users, what they are saying, and yes, I'm glad to say so far, we didn't make a huge mistake, fortunately. [chuckles] [00:18:20] We are not afraid of failing, but so far, so good.

Drew: Those experts are critical. We're not experts in every language. [chuckles] I'd go as far as to say I'm not an expert in any language. [00:18:30] We need to have those experts guiding us, and the more niche the language, the more you lean on those experts because there's cultural importance to language [00:18:40] that we can't begin to understand. We need to listen to them. There's some great stories of how we worked with these experts in Māori, for example, and it wasn't just on the language, it was on our [00:18:50] illustrations. We were like, "Well, this word doesn't have a synonym in any other language. How do we draw it?" They guided us through exactly what illustration [00:19:00] would work for that word. That's critical.

Tamzin: Do you remember what the word was?

Drew: It was a word called "Hongi" and it's a greeting between Māori people, where [00:19:10] they lean forward, and then their heads touch, at least pre-COVID. The way that their heads touch is really important to the meaning to the word. We really needed to get that [00:19:20] illustration right.

Tamzin: That's absolutely fascinating.

Dirk: Wow, you now made me curious, I need to look this up. I do really marvel at the thought about how much getting the language [00:19:30] right really will mean to people speaking the language, even if they are not the ones learning it, or maybe even so, if you're speaking a language and you try to teach your [00:19:40] children a little bit of the background, that may be one of the use cases as well. I really was amazed and that may be another angle to the subject of inclusivity that you also [00:19:50] launched an ASL course, right?

Drew: We did.

Dirk: Maybe we should explain to our listeners what ASL is. That's an American Sign Language.

Drew: American Sign Language. We are the only multilingual [00:20:00] language app that I know of that has a sign language. The way that happened is I had just started with Drops and was visiting my cousin who had graduated from Gallaudet [00:20:10] University for the deaf and hard of hearing. I was telling her about Drops and we had just launched Scripts, which is our alphabet teaching app, [00:20:20] and she said, "Wow, you should put ASL in Scripts, at least the alphabet. It's so easy to do."

I was like, "Yes, we should." [chuckles] I didn't [00:20:30] know at that time that ASL was treated so separately or any sign language. If you go to most tools to learn a sign language, they are their own thing. [00:20:40] We worked with her and I asked her, "Do you know a hard of hearing or deaf graphic designer?" Because again, we want to work with experts. She recommended [00:20:50] one. There's a tangent I'd like to tell about this story because one of our biggest lessons in inclusivity, while we were working to put together ASL, there was [00:21:00] this unspoken issue, and not meaning that as a pun, it really was- no one was talking about this issue that kept surfacing. [00:21:10] It was about sound. How you incorporate or do not incorporate sound when you are teaching a sign language?

There's a bit of a division and I hope I do this justice [00:21:20] because I talked a lot to my cousin about it, there's a bit of division in the deaf and hard of hearing community on whether you use sound or whether you don't [00:21:30] use it at all, that it's a crutch to learning a sign language. We discuss that a lot with both my cousin and our graphic designer. [00:21:40] We decided to make one simple change to our product, which was to have a default for ASL. When you go into Scripts and choose ASL, [00:21:50] the default will be that the audio is off. You can turn it on, the default will be that it's off. All of our other languages and alphabets, it's on. That one simple [00:22:00] change, we'd have never even thought about if we hadn't listened to our experts and more than listened, really understood [00:22:10] what they weren't saying, but came up as an issue if that makes sense.

Dirk: Yes, and it speaks of deep respect you as a company bring towards those who [00:22:20] handle that language, learn that language on a daily basis. We sometimes have blind spots when we are not really impacted ourselves and bring [00:22:30] this type

of insights when it's brought forward by people experiencing it into the apps, I think it's a key effort if you want to be inclusive in your app design, right?

Drew: I think so. I think if [00:22:40] you're going to be inclusive, you have to include the people you're excluding. If you think you know how they feel by being excluded, or why they're not coming to your app, you're wrong. They need [00:22:50] to tell you.

Dirk: Is there something you learned about how to test for this? Because as I mentioned, it's very easy to have a blind spot. It's like, you don't know what you don't know. [00:23:00] Is there any tricks that you picked up how you could at least test it a little bit if it holds water, what you're building?

Drew: Daniel will have a better story about this because he actually experienced-- [00:23:10] When we were launching Hawaiian, and that was our first sticking your toe in the water here, we learned it very quickly because when we were hiring our translator and [00:23:20] voiceover artists, people were telling us, and we then started doing outreach to the communities that were trying to revive Hawaiian. Daniel can tell a story where he spent an [00:23:30] hour and a half with a Hawaiian professor, talking through how we were going to launch this language, and it was a very intense conversation. Daniel, do you have anything to add?

Daniel: [00:23:40] Yes. Especially with Hawaiian, for the indigenous people of Hawaii, this language and the culture itself is basically sacred. It was quite eye-opening [00:23:50] how sensitive this topic is for them and how important it is. Coming from, again, a central European country, literally the opposite side of the globe, [00:24:00] I had zero idea of what's happening with the Hawaiian culture and language. We needed to do stay and be super open and just stay humble throughout the process.

[00:24:10] I think this humbleness is quite typical for our company and how we are building this product and company. I think listening, really listening, and understanding the nuances [00:24:20] of these exotic niches is really a key to provide a really good experience that we are proud of and also the local people are [00:24:30] also proud of.

Tamzin: Drew and Daniel, this is a very interesting conversation about ASL. I just want to take it back to pop music. Tell us about the Korean pop star. [00:24:40]

Drew: I'll start, but again, Daniel had more interaction with this project. The same person that we talked about sending the woman that runs our content that we sent to be there [00:24:50] with AINU, she, as I said, lived in South Korea for a number of years and she loves K-pop. Our first step into K-pop was- [00:25:00] we actually added a K-pop topic in Korean. By the way, Korean is our top language. Again, we are very very strong in character-based languages. [00:25:10] Once that was successful, she said, "Why don't we do a K-pop idol as a voice-over to one of our languages?" [00:25:20] That would expand our reach beyond just traditional language learners, beyond tourists, but to K-pop enthusiasts.

Tamzin: Can I just interrupt to say, is that so that you're better at [00:25:30] Karaoke?

Drew: Oh, I have a terrible singing voice. Daniel and I have done karaoke before in Tokyo. I mostly stayed quiet and drank and listened to Daniel. [00:25:40]

Daniel: Yes, that was funny. We had a press store in Asia, both in South Korea and Japan. When we visited South Korea, that was a watershed moment for me at least, how [00:25:50] big K-pop really is in that country. I'm fascinated by the business of K-pop and

it's huge. We visited the K-pop Museum and really the obsession around K-pop, when Aggy, [00:26:00] the head of content, brought up this idea, I was like, "Okay, let's do this."

As Drew mentioned, Korean is extremely popular for us and we are [00:26:10] very entrepreneurial. Being the first language teaching app that uses celebrity voices to teach a language, that sounded like a really good idea. This might not be [00:26:20] the last language that we are going to use a celebrity voice for.

Tamzin: This sounds like a passion-driven strategy. Looking at it from another angle, how do you use data [00:26:30] to inform some of these efforts?

Drew: You only need to walk into a K-pop museum to get the title.

[laughter]

Drew: We use data more after we launch. [00:26:40] Again, we're a very small company and we have a very simple focused product. We can launch without a lot of resources. We don't have to prove with data beforehand. [00:26:50] After we launch, we're very very cautious to see the data coming in and see if it was a success and then we use that as a stepping stone to either expand [00:27:00] that product or to other products similar to that. We have had great feedback with- Amber Liu is the K-pop idol's name, whose voice-over is in Drops. [00:27:10] Any Amber Liu fans there, you should go to Drops right now. We've had incredible feedback, so as Daniel said, we're probably going to continue that experimentation.

Daniel: [00:27:20] Based on both qualitative and quantitative data, it was clear as the sky for us that the Korean language is worth the investment. Our fans are raving about [00:27:30] the material that we're providing. By the way, we do have K-pop specific topic within Drops. Those specific vocabulary that the K-pop fans are using, [00:27:40] it's actually part of the Korean course.

Tamzin: I'm definitely going to try that after Finnish because I have got some amazing Korean colleagues who I'm desperate to go over and see. [00:27:50] I think out of all my colleagues, they party the best.

Dirk: We get to the point where somebody says, "Tamzin, you speak amazing Finnish, but is there a Korean accent in there?" [00:28:00]

[laughter]

Tamzin: Only when it comes to karaoke. One thing that, Daniel, you mentioned is that, you guys run a very tight ship and a very small team. How did you [00:28:10] use Android to help get to where you are?

Daniel: Yes, we love Android, first of all. It helps us- in terms of inclusion, you're very aware of the fact that [00:28:20] the demographic of Android users and also their economic diversity of Android users is very different from iOS. In India, not many people can afford [00:28:30] iOS devices. Android as a platform provides us great insights into more cultures, more point of views. In terms of development, [00:28:40] you mentioned we are a small team. We actually do not have a separate Android and iOS development team. We are using a framework called React Native, which is a cross-platform framework. [00:28:50] Basically, the code is pretty much identical for both the Android and iOS version.

Drew: I would also add that when we decided to launch Droplets, we worked with the startup [00:29:00] team at Google and that was very, very helpful because it was the first time- to launch a COPPA compliant app for kids, there's a lot of things we didn't know and [00:29:10] you have to get that right. We worked with the startup team and they were incredibly helpful. We've been really close with that team for a while, but this was particularly important [00:29:20] assistance that they gave us.

Tamzin: That's great to hear. I guess I've got a question because when you mentioned it's a language learning app, which is really great for people who have an intellectual curiosity and want to learn certain words, [00:29:30] how do you measure success? How do you know if people have got what they need out of your app?

Drew: Well, business success, I guess that's easy. We're bootstrapped, profitable, and hyper-growth. [00:29:40] That one is fairly easy, but when you're talking about people, our app reviews are incredible. I mean, we're one of the top reviewed [00:29:50] language apps in both stores, in both Google Play and the App Store.

Daniel: In terms of KPIs, revenue is a great indicator of how much value you are providing to our users. [00:30:00] We are really proud of our revenue stream, of course. At the same time, we are also proud of the sheer number of users who are downloading the app. We just passed the 25 million [00:30:10] download mark. Up to this point, this traffic has been organic which means that people are telling to their friends about Drops and the quality of the product is [00:30:20] actually selling itself. Of course, we are also paying a lot of attention of the efficiency KPIs, how many words an average user is picking up.

Here [00:30:30] I want to note something really really important. One insight that we really learned is that consistency, which is basically retention, it should be the [00:30:40] number one KPI for a teaching app. No matter how effective the tool is, if people are not using it on a daily basis, it doesn't matter. Drops had a predecessor [00:30:50] product, it was called Learning Visible. It was built around effectiveness, but it flopped exactly because their retention was not there. It was really effective, it used the right didactic [00:31:00] tactics and tricks, but we needed to pivot into a different solution that is built upon stickiness and the fact that the goal of Drops from the very beginning is to make it [00:31:10] so appealing that people can't wait to come back the next day and the next day and the next day and the next day.

Tamzin: Coming back to the topic, how do you calculate how inclusivity in the [00:31:20] app actually contributes to your success, makes you stand out?

Drew: The user feedback. One of the things that because we're so small, even if we weren't so small, we have our support team [00:31:30] integrated directly into the product team. We don't separate them. A lot of people have support within finance or within administration, we have it within the product team because we [00:31:40] want that feedback from our users to go directly into product development. Every week in our company meetings, we have what are the top three user feedbacks of [00:31:50] this week? We talk about them as a company and integrate them.

We look at that positively and negatively, but we focus more on what are the things missing [00:32:00] for users. People will tell us, and you know this, users will tell you if something is missing for them and if you're not being inclusive enough. A great example [00:32:10] of how we've changed our product here is our gendered illustrations. Most languages are gendered, Hungarian is not, interesting enough, but most Latin languages [00:32:20] are gendered. You need to display some kind of gender, but our users, a

couple of years back said, "The way that you're depicting females is overly [00:32:30] gendered." We got a new illustration firm, we spent a lot of time on this, and we wanted to get the right balance between presenting a gender but not over-gendering. [00:32:40] That came directly from our users.

Tamzin: That's brilliant to hear. If you were to give three tips for some of the listeners out there, some of the entrepreneurs who are building products and they want [00:32:50] their product to be more inclusive, what would those three tips be?

Daniel: The number one is inclusivity could be a good business. [00:33:00] When we started this inclusive project such as introducing indigenous languages, we weren't so sure. It all started with Icelandic in terms of indigenous languages. [00:33:10] When we started Icelandic, it was a fun project. It was my baby [00:33:13] to be honest. I loved Icelandic culture and Iceland as a culture, and Island and natural beauty, [00:33:20] but it proved to be a commercial success. Icelandic as a language has the highest ARPU, which is average revenue per user, amongst all our languages. [00:33:30] Every single language, like Icelandic brings in the most money.

Drew: Per user.

Daniel: Per user. That's correct. That's what started Hawaiian. At Hawaiian, [00:33:40] besides being the commercial success, it was also a PR success. It made a great story. Our few first big coverages were thanks to [00:33:50] the Hawaiian. That would be my advice number one that it pays off. Inclusivity can be a good business besides goodwill.

A second one, I would say be practical [00:34:00] and start small. We started with Icelandic. If Icelandic wouldn't be a commercial success, I'm not so sure if we would be that [00:34:10] adventures with the rest of the indigenous languages. Start small, see what's the feedback, and if it works, then scale it up. You can start small with this [00:34:20] as well, especially if you're a bootstrap company as we are, and you don't have all the money to burn.

The third one, I would say, be inclusive in terms of team building as well. [00:34:30] I do believe that only an inclusive diverse team can build really inclusive products. Be open, listen to the different voices. Different is beautiful.

Dirk: All right. [00:34:40] I think that makes a wonderful final statement, doesn't it?

Tamzin: Absolutely.

[music]

[00:34:50]

Dirk: Many thanks, Drew, and Daniel, for joining us today and sharing your insights. Thank you to you too, our listeners, for tuning in. If you have any thoughts on the topics [00:35:00] covered on today's episode, we'd love to hear from you. You can find us on Twitter at hashtag #GooglePlayDev. Keep an eye out and subscribe to our podcast for the next episode coming soon. [00:35:10] Until next time, keep playing and learning.

[music]

[00:35:20]

[00:35:23] [END OF AUDIO]