

TRANSCRIPT

Learning Unboxed



Episode #286

Tim Waldron:

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If we can get these kiddos reading, engaged with reading, and then reading at grade level, that's where the power of learning really takes hold, right? Where these kids can start to participate in the classroom, participate in the deep, enriching discussion that leads to comprehension, that leads to other additional opportunities.

Annalies Corbin:

Welcome to Learning Unboxed, a conversation about teaching, learning, and the future of work. I'm your host and chief goddess of the PAST Foundation, Annalies Corbin. We know the current model for education is obsolete. It was designed to create fleets of assembly line workers, not the thinkers and problem solvers needed today. We've seen the innovations that are possible within education, and it's our goal to leave the box behind and reimagine what education can look like in your own backyard.

Welcome to Learning Unboxed. Today, we are going to be talking about reading skills development as a positive disruptor in education. And joining us today is Tim Waldron, CEO of Readable English. Tim, welcome to Learning Unboxed.

Tim Waldron:

Thank you very much for having me. Excited for the discussion today.

Annalies Corbin:

Yeah, me as well. But let's set some context for our listeners as we get started. Readable English provides a practical research-backed solution for improving reading skills quickly and effectively. Readable English is a research-proven, accelerated reading program that uses systematic phonics and phonemic awareness to exponentially increase fluency and comprehension.

Readable English is a multi-sensory reading program for students in grades two through eight. This multi-sensory reading program is proven to close the gap for struggling readers, special education students, and English language learners. By embedding the patented phonetic system of visual cues or glyphs, teachers and students have what they need to streamline the learning process and students learn to read fast.

Super excited about this conversation. Alright, Tim. So, now that we have a better understanding, sort of, of what the work you're doing now is, I always like to talk with folks about the bigger question, which is the why. So, we all know how important our reading skills are, but I also wonder if we really understand fully, kind of on a global scale, how frequent it is for folks to really struggle with this.

Tim Waldron:

Yeah, it is so widely spread. And as I talk to folks that are not involved in education, in the business world, working in non-profits, unrelated to education, their eyes are really open wide when they start to see some of the statistics that are staggering, the amount of population that are struggling to read, whether it's our youngsters or adults. It's so pervasive in our society and it's really creating a crisis at the educational level. It's creating a crisis at the economic level with hiring managers not being able to hire qualified personnel.

And so, there's been some great work being done but it's work that has been taking place for decades. I just read an interesting article the other day that highlighted back in the '80s a big push for literacy reform. And as decades pass and pass still nothing has really changed. And I want to give kudos out to the folks in early literacy right now really embracing across the country, the principles of science of reading, seeing some wonderful work being done.

Our focus right now is we have the large populations of students that are in upper elementary, middle and high school that are really far behind, staggeringly far behind, reading at first-second grade level. And as academic rigor increases, the demands of these individuals, these youngsters increases, the harder and harder it becomes to get them back onto reading grade level. And then, you have the social pressures that are weighed against these youngsters as well.

And I'm a parent of two wonderful children. My daughter just entered middle school. She is in sixth grade. And my son is in fourth grade. And you just start to see it. We experienced it ourselves as youngsters, but having children and seeing my daughter starting to feel that social pressure, if you're surrounded by students that are proficient in reading and you're sitting there and you're singled out, that is a big weight to carry on your self-esteem. And it has lasting impacts if you can't get over that hurdle.

And this is not just talking about students with dyslexia or students that are English language learners or multilingual learners. There are so many kids that are just far behind because of the pandemic and the learning loss that that had on our population, the impact of technology on reading stamina and just the interest of reading.

And so, we know the benefits of if we can get these kiddos reading, engaged with reading, and then reading at grade level, that's where the power of learning really takes hold, where these kids can start to participate in classroom, participate in the deep, riching discussion that leads to comprehension, that leads to other additional opportunities. So, my work day to day is really exciting because I get to be part of this movement to try to figure this out, because we're all gonna benefit if we can really start to make some good strides and not just in early literacy, but it needs to be about our adolescent kiddos as well.

Annalies Corbin:

And I think that's a really interesting piece of the conversation, right? Because typically when we have this conversation, we're talking about our littles. We're talking about kids being prepared to go to kindergarten. We're talking about kids being prepared to leave kindergarten and go to first grade and so on. But really, that's not the only place we see this big disconnect. And so, I really appreciate the ability to talk about this as an upper elementary, middle school, or even a high school phenomenon.

So, I'm really curious, from the research and the work that everybody has done at Readable English, and we will get in at the end of the program to really talking about what the program and the tool actually does, but tell us, I mean, what surprised you as you were going down this journey? What surprised you from that research, especially as it related to our older learners, again, the ones who are not English-as-a-second-language, or our students with very discernible reading disabilities, if you will, right? Because we know that these tools really help in those spaces. But what was interesting to you from a research perspective about, why is this happening? Mainstream, sort of older students still so far behind.

Tim Waldron:

Yeah, I mentioned a few of those elements that are more recent, right? The technology and the pandemic, but this problem has been around for a long time. At the core and the inventor of Readable English, her name is Ann Fitts and just an unbelievable individual. And her background is in Lindamood-Bell and Orton-Gillingham. That's where she was trained in. And really, those are the foremost methodologies in terms of providing support for our dyslexic students. And she actually ran the reading clinic here in the San Francisco Bay Area, very successful. But she realized that even after these parents shelled out thousands of dollars a year for several years, there was no guarantee of outcome.

And so, the long story short is that she divested her interest in the reading clinic and set out on a mission to figure out why. Why is it so hard for our dyslexic students, but

just anyone? We even find it as adults that we're presented with new words that we have trouble pronouncing them, even if we are proficient readers.

And so, what her research found was that the erratic nature or the chaotic nature of the spelling structure of the English language lends itself to why does it takes so many years of instruction to teach decoding, to teach fluency, to get to a level of automaticity. When you look at the history of how the English language is cobbled together, and I use that word very specifically because we have influences from so many different languages, we have instances where the word friend, for example, why is that I in the word to begin with? When you look at the history, it was because the print setters in the printing presses in Germany and Belgium were paid by the line. And so, they would add letters into certain words to get paid more. And over time, those words just stuck.

Again, some words that we see are, you know, just related to other languages, but we have so many phonemes. We have 44 unique phonemes in the English language. And so, that lends itself to say, all right, well, when we have the letter E and there's nine different ways to pronounce the letter E, and then we have letters before, letters after, we have to come up with all these rules and exceptions and create an instructional methodology to teach all those rules and exceptions.

Well, if you don't get that the first time around, it becomes harder and harder to get those patterns mapped to your long-term memory. And so that's why we see this persistence of more and more of our population struggling. And so, that's really what we found is if we can start to work towards making the English language more phonetic and providing resources. And even within Orton-Gillingham, there are components of using things like diacritical marks. Again, something that we are not familiar with as a monolingual society.

Even the language that is second to English, which in Spanish, they use accents. They don't really use diacritical marks like what we see in ancient languages like Arabic or Hebrew, where they have scaffolded systems to provide embedded instructional support or Turkish or Vietnamese, which have permanent diacritics to aid in their pronunciation. If we provide that type of aid and like with Orton-Gillingham where they have sandbox environments where they understand the need for these symbols and the benefit, if we can extrapolate that out and start to apply that, we can start to mirror the instructional times that we see in languages that are largely phonetic.

And so, there's been a lot of research done that if you look at countries like Italy or Spain or Greece, languages that are largely phonetic, you can start to see accurate sight word recognition with one year of instruction, where we have standards for three and a half years. That doesn't mean that the practice doesn't end.

And that's something as a parent that I'm worried about. I'm very, given my work, acutely aware to my middle school or in particular, at some point, you stop hearing them read out loud. And you're sitting there, do I know if they're pronouncing, if they are decoding these words accurately? They're getting introduced to more multi-syllabic words. Are those patterns correctly mapped to their long-term memory?

And so, if we can have a focus on looking at the English language, how can we make that more phonetic? How can we introduce ways to get these older students to be comfortable, be confident in reading out loud. That's what I find as well. Like this is my kids don't want to read out loud. They just don't.

Annalies Corbin:

Oh no. No, they don't want to do it at all, right? And if you call on a kid, like in a literature class and everybody's going to take turns reading paragraphs or something, you would have thought that you had asked these kids to run through the football field with silly purple hats on their heads. It's just like, oh my gosh, the mortification and the embarrassment, I couldn't possibly read out loud.

Tim Waldron:

Yeah, yeah. And my daughter's a proficient reader. She's been on track at every grade level, right? And she's still feeling that, let alone, that kiddo that's sitting there with-

Annalies Corbin:

Really struggling.

Tim Waldron:

Which is really struggling.

Annalies Corbin:

So, I'm also curious, and then we're gonna sort of get into the weeds about how your program really works, because it's really interesting, and I think that folks will really enjoy that piece of the conversation. But before we move on to that, I also want to sort of talk about the phenomenon around... So, it's one thing if you have grown up and English is your primary language. It's a whole nother thing if English was not your primary language, and you are having, suddenly, to find yourself new perhaps in this country or in an environment where it's just very very different, thrown into and you have to learn. So, how do you sort of take those same issues and fast-track them for students who the gap is even wider for them?

Tim Waldron:

The reality is there is no easy solution, especially if you're a newcomer or L1 in those later. It is hard work and we have to recognize that. And there are, again... I'll recognize you know the educators I see week in and week out across the country

that are working with these students. It takes a lot of one-to-one, small group time. I think one thing that we see in our educational system is making sure that they have the infrastructure, the resources, and the time in the day to really get into it.

Learning a language, if you've ever tried as an adult, it's very hard. And so, then, we're asking those students to also participate in the classroom, in their other subject areas at grade level. And so, I think there's practices being done to level content. The one thing that I worry about leveling content is that really puts the onus on the teacher in a lot of cases to figure out what level that one student is. Then, depending on the size of their class, they're working in a lot of different ways and a lot of different variables that they need to account for.

So, one thing that drives me is again, how can we get these kiddos reading at grade level with one another? And so, yeah, it's just challenging work and it requires really passionate people and some strong practices and methodologies, and it just takes time. It takes time.

And the one thing that I, especially in the later grades, because they're getting closer and closer, these students to career, is to make it personal to them so they can start to visualize where they're gonna be and starting to empower them with some skill development that gives them a pathway into making a living for themselves. And I think that inspires hope if we can do that.

So, we're thinking a lot about career and technical pathways in particular, just career connected learning. I think a lot of folks are focused on that. I spent a lot of time myself in college and career readiness and working in that space for nearly a decade. And it's close to my heart myself. And it's interesting in California, back when I was coming up, and it still upsets my mom to this day, is that they cut all CTE from middle school and high schools in California. But so many kiddos lend themselves to really thriving in those environments, but we can't forget that there was a literacy component for CTE. It's just not working with your hands. You need to be able to read the application forms or the standard operating procedures.

And so, like I said, those multilingual learners, if they're in that situation to where they're fighting to get to a level of fluency in the English language, I do believe that bridge with career and then sound methodologies can really start to accelerate their ability to become more proficient and re-engage with their classmates.

Annalies Corbin:

And what about the immersion component? I mean, one of the things we have a fair number of English language learners in the ecosystem where we operate, and we find that often one of the things that helps, it does not solve, it helps with the acceleration of the absorption of being able to understand the rules of the language and then

being able to get to that fluency piece, to be able to use it in practical settings, right? So, it's not just that they're sitting doing the tasks, learning the reading or the speaking or the writing elements, but literally having... and to your point, we do it all through sort of these workforce development lenses, it's all this career focus, like there's a need that that individual student has to be successful with this that they naturally tap into. And we do see that it accelerates the understanding. You see that as well?

Tim Waldron:

Yeah, I do. If I'm understanding the question, it has to be about writing, it has to be about reading, it has to be about the speaking of the language.

Annalies Corbin:

And using it in a practical setting. So, it's not just in theory, I'm doing this and I'm going through this exercise, but you're actually putting me in a setting where I have a practical need for this right this moment. It's a low stakes setting because we created those settings, if you will, right? But if a student is struggling with a spoken component or a reading component or a writing component because of that practical setting, there's a step back moment that says, okay, now we can address this right here in this opportunity. But the kid has a context for the why in this moment. There's an urgency that's built in, right?

Tim Waldron:

A hundred percent, yeah. If you could create an environment to where you have this kinesthetic type of environment, yeah, it's just going to reinforce it. We'll notice that if you look at the rules and the exceptions to learn, say Spanish and Italian, very light on the rules. And you can get to a point to where you can pronounce those words rather quickly.

And I actually just had a full family retreat down in Mexico earlier on this year, and I never studied Spanish but I know some vocabulary just growing up here in California and I know the basic sounds, right? It's amazing, even within that five or six days that I could read the menu and pronounce it more or less correctly, and then I could spend more time on the non-verbals. I could take in the full environment of, say, when I'm ordering food, if I'm not stumbling over the literacy component of it, the reading of it, the pronunciation of those words. If that decoding is a smoother process for the reader, it again, opens up all the sensories to be able to feel out and get a sense of the full context of what's going on around you.

So, yeah, I think you're spot on in that thinking. And then, again, wrapped into the writing component of language acquisition is huge as well. It just reinforces everything. Again, it's that sensory of writing it down in the motion and as you're mapping those different components of the written word into your long-term memory.

Also, I wasn't sure if you were going down the path of talking about bilingual education and we have a lot of immersion programs in California and throughout the US. One thing is that we never want to deter the instruction of their L1, their first language, especially at home, right? Because even if we look at the data between, you know, students that are literate in their home language or their L1 or not, their rate of adoption of English language increases exponentially over the student that had no instruction in their L1. And so, we wanna encourage that L1 kind of work to take place. There's value in it. They're still learning a language. They're exercising that muscle. And yeah, it's just, it's really beneficial for sure.

Annalies Corbin:

Very, very interesting. Very interesting. Okay. So, let's get into the nuts and bolts a little bit here about how does readable English work, especially like in a school setting, because it's not just available to individual students and families, which my take is that it is, but there are whole school applications or program applications.

So, if you're a school, and this is interesting, so I guess two questions really. First, help us understand to a very high level some of the program components. And then how, as a school or a district, how do I get access to this? How do I make this possible? And really, I guess, what would that look like at scale? Because that scale is really one of the tricky parts about all of these amazing innovations that are tied to real structured or advanced uses of technology as a platform driver.

Tim Waldron:

When we look at the... I like to say it's a tool with readable English, it's not really a program or a curriculum. It's this methodology to make the English language phonetic, which we did by infusing a markup that is made up of three components. So, the syllable breaks, the great out letters for the silent letters, and so that the readers don't have to worry about that. And then, we've come up with 21 diacritical marks, which we call glyphs for the 44 unique phonemes in the English language.

And so, think love, move, cove, same spelling structure, but the O makes a different sound, we want to get to a level of transparency between the letter and the sound. That's really what's missing within the English language. That's what makes it very difficult. And so, the learner can reduce their cognitive load by just seeing that symbol and recalling that and decoding the word really rapidly.

So, when we talk about the science of reading, what our alignment really is to is the lower rope of Scarborough's rope, and focusing on decoding and fluency and getting to a level of automaticity, so they can start to increase their words correct per minute. That opens up that brain power to see the full contextual kind of connection between the words, the sentences, the environment that is around them.

And so, once we have that markup in place, we created a 100,000 plus dictionary of words that have been marked up. And then, once we have that dictionary, we've created various different technology tools that can apply the markup to any and all texts. So, whether that's print materials or digital content. So, for digital, that kiddo who is going from math, science, social studies, they have a browser extension on their computer device. They come up to a word that they can't decode, they can double click that word, that word will be marked up for that entire session that they're reading, but they'll also get the definition of that word markup, they can hear it pronounced, they can get a refresher of the glyphs that are used in that word, they can also see that word translated into their L1.

And so, I really liken that tool in particular to almost like a literacy accessibility tool for the students that are struggling. And it really puts them in the driver's seat of their intervention, of their support. They don't need to raise their hand anymore in classroom. They have this code. They've broken this code with the knowledge of the diacritical marks and this tool to be able to get the support when and where they need it.

That tool also can be used for one-on-one tutoring, small group, as well as whole class instruction. We talked about CTE. One of the things that we're rolling out here soon is a series of reading practices aligned to all the career clusters and career pathways to where a CTE coordinator, who's not a reading specialist, nor do we expect them to be a reading specialist, can infuse some reading practice, 10 minute almost reading power-ups aligned to their work to which the students can practice learning about a particular career pathway or career cluster. And all of that text is already natively marked up.

Annalies Corbin:

That's brilliant. I love that, right? I mean, that's really powerful.

Tim Waldron:

Yeah. So we're about trying to find this cohesion, specifically in secondary, right? Because again, we're already expected in the way our school systems are designed, that reading and decoding was already meant to be taught. These students already should have these skills.

And so, anytime that we can help district leaders, site-level leaders, figure out where in the schedule, we can, you know, start to infuse some literacy intervention, it's for the benefit. And I think that's what these educational leaders are clamoring for. Something that doesn't create a major lift for their teachers. We could talk about the issues that we're seeing across the country with teacher shortages. So, district leaders, school leaders are desperate for solutions that don't require a high degree of professional development.

With Readable English, we ask for two 45-minute virtual sessions to become familiarized with the system and learn about some of the assessments that we have. But then it's around tech enablement and getting the programs into the hands of these students. They learn the glyphs that can take anywhere between two to four weeks, depending on the amount of time they're dedicated to it. Then, they turn on these conversion tools, and it's really about practicing reading. Read 15 minutes, 30 minutes a day. If we start to see a regular application, as little as 30 minutes of reading, three days a week, students should see around two years worth of growth in about a semester.

Annalies Corbin:

Wow, that's fabulous.

Tim Waldron:

That can be an English language learner, that can be a kid fighting through dyslexia as well.

Annalies Corbin:

Awesome, pretty amazing. Yeah. Yeah, really quickly, we will make sure in the show notes, we have links to the website and whatnot, but if you're a school and you're really wanting to have a conversation about this, what's the best way to start to engage with Readable English to really run down the road to see what's possible?

Tim Waldron:

Yeah, we've done a lot of work to really build out a website that can be very informative. So, we have a lot of good information at www.readableenglish.com. Also request some time to meet with us, even if it's 15 to 20 minutes, we can walk you through a quick demonstration, share some of our peer-reviewed studies, some of, you know, examples of the lessons being taught in classrooms, provide you a demo account, and really have you experience this for yourself in your classroom. Even if it's for one teacher with one student, we want to make sure that folks know about this and the power of this and how transformational it can be down to a single student. And so, yeah, just reach out. We're here to support any way we can.

Annalies Corbin:

I really appreciate that. And I want to thank you very much, Tim, for taking time out of your day to chat with us and to share what's happening with Readable English. It's a space that we so desperately need these types of innovations in, and so many people will benefit from it. And just really, really enjoy your willingness to have a conversation about what you've got going on and what's coming and why it's making a difference in the lives of kids.

Tim Waldron:

Yeah, thanks for saying that and really appreciate you having me on today.

Annalies Corbin:

Absolutely, yeah. Thank you so much.

Tim Waldron:

Thank you.

Annalies Corbin:

Thank you for joining us for Learning Unboxed, a conversation about teaching, learning, and the future of work. I want to thank my guests and encourage you all to be part of the conversation. Meet me on social media, @AnnaliesCorbin, and join me next time as we stand up, step back, and lean in to reimagine education.