

Albert Chou:

This is IT Visionaries, your #1 source for actionable insights and exclusive interviews with CIOs, CTOs and CISOs and many more. I'm your host, Albert Chou, a former CIO, former sales VP, and now podcast host.

Welcome everyone to another episode of IT Visionaries and today we got a special guest. His name is Sameer Shariff. He's the co-founder and CEO of a company called Cambly. And what's unique about Cambly is it is a language app or technology, but they only focus on English, which is very unlike the others. Sameer, welcome to the show.

Sameer Shariff:

Thanks for having me. I'm super excited to be here. And I've enjoyed the show in the past.

Albert Chou:

Hey, listen. I'm glad we have a fan. You know what I mean? Like, I always wonder, Who will actually listen to the show? So, glad to hear that you listen to the show. But before we get too far into your journey and the company's journey, you know, let's start with what we kicked off in the intro. It's a technology. It's a platform. It teaches only English. What is Cambly?

Sameer Shariff:

Yeah, so Cambly is a really simple app. You open the app, uh, you press the button, and within a few seconds, we connect you to a friendly native English speaker over video chat. So, one on one student and tutor. So, it's a two sided marketplace. Students on one side, tutors on the other. The students pay to- to subscribe to the service and the tutors get paid to talk to students. Uh, so we've got really global customer base people who are trying to learn to speak English and- and get more confident in their English fluency.

Albert Chou:

Okay, so this is a marketplace very similar to Uber. It's a- instead of a car coming to me, I have an English tutor coming to me. Now, there's a general accepted standard of what a driver is. Let's start there. How did you come up with the idea? And how did you start to, I guess, standardize or ensure that the teachers of English were actually good at it? Because I feel like, I don't know where you got started? Was it the supply side or the demand side? I don't know. How did this all come about?

Sameer Shariff:

Yeah. So- so the inspiration for Cambly really came out of our own experiences, trying to learn other languages. And so my co-founder, uh, his name is Kevin, he and I both grew up here in the U.S. and we went to school systems here. And like many Americans, we took foreign languages in school. And for me, personally, like I took Spanish, and I wasn't really very good at it.

Albert Chou:

(laughs)

Sameer Shariff:

Uh, I- I was actually quite bad at it. And I kind of just thought I wasn't really a linguist person. Independent of that, I- I love to travel, I've been all over the world, and some of the places I would go,

people just, people spoke Spanish. And what I found is that when I immersed myself in the language, I got so much better at it so much more quickly. And not just that, it was, it was like far more rewarding than learning Spanish in a classroom environment ever was. What I found is it kind of took a situation where I was surrounded by people that only spoke Spanish to really like get me out of my shell. But when I did that, it was really an effective way to- to learn.

And so, you know, my co-founder, with a very similar experience learning French, uh, and then visiting France. Uh, we kind of got together around this idea, like, why can't we do that whenever we want? There's plenty of people in the world that speak those languages. They just don't happen to live near us. And we were technologists and product people. And so we thought, "Hey, this seems like a kind of problem that technology could solve." And so that's kind of what drew us into this. And what we wanted wasn't necessarily a professional teacher or a formal lesson. What we wanted is just like a friendly person we could practice speaking with, much like what you do when you're, when you're traveling.

You strike up, strike up a conversation with someone, you know. And as I mentioned, my co-founder, Kevin, wanted to learn French, I wanted to learn Spanish, but we pretty quickly realized that the world wants to learn English, like that's, that's the biggest market. And so, we decided to focus on English. What we found is if you zoom out a bit, and you look at the world, it's about 7.5, 8 billion people in the world. Six billion of them don't, don't speak English. And- and by the way, of those 6 billion people, 1.5 billion are actively trying to learn it right now. So, it's just an enormous number, but I think what's, what's interesting about this problem is, uh, it's just not a problem that- that those of us who speak English see everyday. Like, we don't have the problem ourselves.

Albert Chou:

Sure.

Sameer Shariff:

No one we know has a problem. It's not a coincidence that our friends and family speak English. Like, we talk to them all the time. And so, it's just sort of an enormous problem in the world, but one that the English speaking world largely missed. And I- I talked about my wanting to learn Spanish and, and you know, I think for- for those of us who speak English, uh, we might think learning, me learning Spanish or someone else learning English, they're kind of the same. But in reality, it's not really the case. English is- is very, very different. People who are learning English, are doing it for like, a very specific reason. Like, they- they want to learn English because it's, it can change their lives. It- it, you know, it'll, it'll give them access to, uh, a job that they would have never been able to get otherwise or a promotion they would have never been able to get. I think access information is a really big one. Like, we all have information at our fingertips through, you know, the smartphone era. Uh, but actually, a lot of it, information on the internet is in English. A lot of really good information through podcasts like this.

Uh, you know, you think of them as being globally accessible, but they are only accessible to the, the, the subset of people that speak English. So, there's just tons of examples like this that I think those of us who speak English or, you know, kind of take for granted. But if you don't know English, you feel these problems are really, really acutely. And so it's, it's a really strong need and there's an immense demand for people who don't know English to, to learn it because, um, the economic opportunity unlocks for them.

Albert Chou:

Yeah, I never really thought of it that way. And I, and I definitely grew up, you know, I grew up in the immigrant household. My parents, they spoke Mandarin and all my uncles and aunts, they all spoke Mandarin. They all, they all attempted to learn English along the way. And I saw firsthand the struggle of one of my cousin's, for example, or three of my cousins. They moved to America much later in life. Like they were 16 or so when they moved to America and they, they moved to America from Taiwan. So they had spoken Mandarin, you know, for 16 years.

Yeah, big massive challenge. When you were developing the technology, you- you had this hypothesis that you could connect. On a conversational level, uh, it sounds like-. From the very beginning, did you identify that it was going to be just anyone could be connected or did you first think it would have to be a teacher with certifications or something like that? Or was it always, "Hey, let's start at the conversation level?"

Sameer Shariff:

We kind of were thinking about what we wanted ourselves. And it wasn't actually like, uh, a really formal lesson. I think we wanted, uh, we thought a lot about it. It was like, "Would you like, you know, buy coffee for someone, uh, if- if you got to, like speak in Spanish or speaking English with them for 15 minutes? And, and sort of, that was the way we, we thought about it in our early days.

And, and because of that framing, and because of kind of the inspiration of where the product came from, like, uh, we did actually pull in like, a diverse set of tutors. And, and actually, even before that, initially, when we were getting started, Kevin and I were the only two tutors. Uh, and so we basically spend our days, either like writing code and building the product.

Albert Chou:

(laughs)

Sameer Shariff:

Or talking to our like, potential customers. And I can like, picture like, you know, being in the middle of building out some feature, and then getting a call and like running off to the other room to, you know, talk to, talk to someone. And it ended up being actually a really great way to learn, like pretty deeply about what our customers needed. Like, you know, you always hear like, you should talk to your customers a lot in the early days to really like understand their needs, understand where they're coming from, what they're looking for. And I think Cambly was, you know, it worked out really well because we were excited to talk to our customers.

Uh, our customers wanted to speak with native English speakers, which we happen to be. And so it was just kind of an interesting symbiotic relationship where it was, it was really valuable, I think, uh, to do that in the early days. Uh, uh, we wanted the service to be on demand. We just wanted to be really easy. Like anytime, day or night, you want to practice speaking English, you can just press a button and get someone. There was a lot of technology we had to build actually to deliver that out, but, but obviously, if there was only two tutors, uh, and we lived in the same city and we slept roughly the same hours, the service was totally broken when it was just the two of us.

And so we, we, you know, we pretty quickly realized we needed to like actually build out a community of tutors. Uh, but yeah, as we did that, we kind of looked for diversity. We looked for like pretty different characteristics than, uh, that I think a lot of other companies would have done like, because we didn't want that formal lesson necessarily. We wanted like, the friendly person you could talk to and, and cared about.

Like, if they had the same occupation as you, for example, that could be really valuable. And so, you know, I think it was not obvious when we were getting started that, that people would pay to talk to just a regular person. But I think we've, we kind of created that category and have shown that it actually is incredibly valuable and there's a lot of demand for that.

Albert Chou:

That is an interesting perspective to come from. In the past, I attempted to build, uh, a marketplace myself. It did not work out, which is fine. But one of the big challenges I'm thinking as you're talking about this, and you already hinted at it, was the tutors. So, how did you start getting- because you and Kevin can only, like you already said, you know, you obviously live in the same time zone, you can only handle so many calls, you can handle two concurrent customers. That doesn't seem good.

Sameer Shariff:

(laughs)

Albert Chou:

Uh. (laughs)

Sameer Shariff:

Yeah, when you're, when you're personally delivering all the value on your marketplace, you know, you know, you're gonna hit, you're gonna hit some, you know, not a lot of headroom on that, so. (laughs)

Albert Chou:

Yeah. Yeah, I'm sure like, I'm sure if eBay, when it got started, only had two sellers or Uber had two drivers in one city like, (laughs) it doesn't matter how good the technology is, man. No one wants to use it. Not enough supply of goods. Give us an idea. How did you start recruiting this? Because this is probably a non-technical effort. How did you start getting other people to say, "Yes, I will receive calls for you on Cambly." Oh, and real quick. Also, do I have to speak another language?

Sameer Shariff:

Uh no. No, you don't.

Albert Chou:

Okay.

Sameer Shariff:

So, in the early days, we were like pretty scrappy, posting to like, job boards, Craigslist, things like that. We did an application process. So it's not like anyone could just sign up and start tutoring. We, we would have them apply and we kind of learned over time what kind of traits led to them being a really good tutor. It's actually like a really cool job to be a tutor on, on Cambly. Uh, uh, for- for people like me who love to travel, you basically get to talk to interesting people around the world, hear about their lives.

You can work anytime you want, it's totally flexible, and you get paid for it. And so, it wasn't long, I think, before we, you know, we got our initial sort of cohort of tutors. And it wasn't long before like, word started to spread. And so, um, we actually have grown our tutor community a lot through word of

mouth, just because it's a really, it's a really great job. Generally, we've been in this, in the position where we've had a long wait list of tutors that are, uh, eager to- to join the platform and we just kind of onboard them and sort of [inaudible 00:10:28] step with our student's side growth to keep the marketplace balanced.

Albert Chou:

Interesting. So curiously, how much does, does your average tutor earn an hour?

Sameer Shariff:

Per hour, it's actually a fixed rate. It's about \$10 an hour.

Albert Chou:

Okay.

Sameer Shariff:

Per week or per month. It varies a lot based on, uh, how long they, they tutor and it's totally flexible. So like, we've got tutors who treat it like a full time job and working 40 hours a week. And then we've also got a lot of tutors that just do it because it's really fun and it's rewarding. And maybe they taught, uh, English at some point in their past, and they, they miss it, and they, you know, might work, you know, five or 10 hours a week.

And they're doing it a little bit for the money, but also because, because it's fun. And we actually like, encourage that, like we like that because, you know, we really want to foster like a really diverse community of tutors. And I think when you allow that flexibility, you can have people, that you know, you end up getting different types of tutors on the platform.

Albert Chou:

I'm already going to sign up, I'm telling you right now, because I feel like that'd be great. If someone speaks Mandarin on the side, then I can practice my Chinese while they speak English to me.

Sameer Shariff:

Yeah. Yeah.

Albert Chou:

You know (laughs). When you're building this platform, you know, I'm thinking about all the different technologies that would go into this platform. Of course, whenever you pitch an idea, you'll never hear people oversimplify things like, "Oh, why can't it just be zoom?" Right? Like, "Why do I, why do I even need Cambly at all?"

Give us an idea of where you focus your engineering efforts because you mentioned you were talking to customers, being very customer centric. What was it unique that you discovered that you said, "Hey, these are the features, technical features that we need, that are going to help, uh, you know, second language learners have a really good experience?"

Sameer Shariff:

Yes, I think it starts with like the sort of core fundamentals, the basics. Like, we wanted to make it. So, it was just incredibly easy to be able to start having a conversation like, right now. And so, this was pretty unusual at the time. And actually, like, even today, I- we maybe still the only service that gives you, like on demand instant access to a native English speaker over video chat. And, and so really coming from like a customer centric view, like we just wanted to make it so easy that, that you like, you might as well do it basically.

Like, you know, I think a lot of services out there either piggyback on other video chat technologies, like a, like a Skype, for example, or a lot of it's all like reservation only and it may not be that easy to get a slot. And so, we wanted to kind of go to the opposite side of that spectrum where you open your app, you press a button, and within a few seconds, you're talking to someone. Just make it incredibly easy.

You men- you mentioned the Uber example, uh, earlier, and I think there's a lot of parallels there where the app, I mean we made the app almost comically simple. It was like one button and when you hit it, you got a [inaudible 00:12:59] instantly.

Albert Chou:

It was like a walkie-talkie.

Sameer Shariff:

Yeah, totally. Uh, uh, and actually, like it was, it was so simple, but also such a unusual experience for students that, you know, when we, sometimes we would answer that call, and people would just assume that it's like a pre-recorded video, and you'd have to be like, "Hey, I'm actually really here, like I'm talking to you, Albert." (laughs) And then it would kind of blow people's minds that we could deliver a person instantly, you know, across the world, right? And so, I think there are a lot of parallels to a service like Uber where the app is really simple, but there's actually a lot of technology behind the scenes in order to deliver this experience, you know.

For example, you need to, if you want to be able to provide a tutor within seconds every time someone hits that button, you have to be able to predict what your demand is going to be any hour of any day. And then you have to set up systems so you have enough supply to service that demand. So, that kind of gives you a sense of the types, of types of challenges we have to solve early on. But we- we really kind of initially prioritize this, delivering the seamless customer experience, which I think really made us stand out in terms of the other services, other kinds of similar, similar types of services that were out there.

Once we got that, like that core experience, right? We started to build another technology to- to make the experience even better. And so, you know, things like building a messaging system, uh, so you can like send text chat back and forth. Uh, that's actually a feature that, you know, for a short time we experimented with the Spanish app, which, as I mentioned, there's much less demand for, uh, learning Spanish than there is learning English. But what was cool about that is Kevin and I got to be students. And so we got to feel the student experience. And we pretty quickly realized, like, I want to be able to send, send text back and forth. Like, this is really hard to do-

Albert Chou:

Yeah.

Sameer Shariff:

Without the ability to do that. And so we built that feature. And so, it kind of gives you a sense of like, the iteration cycles we were going through in the early days. We made it also so you can translate that.

You could use Google Translate to translate any text, just one of the things that you need. We built out student profiles so the tutor could quickly see like, what are the student looking for? What are their goals? What is their level, right?

So, so if they switch tutors, there was a clean handoff. So, things like that. You can imagine just like, how do you create the best experience for the student possible? And so there's a bunch of things like that to enhance the actual video chat. Eventually, we went and built out some curriculum for people who wanted a bit more structure. Uh, and so yeah, we've kind of layered on a bunch of other, other pieces of technology to make for the best customer experience we can.

Albert Chou:

Yeah, and for our audience listening, you might be hearing this like, "Oh, well how successful has it worked? So like, we found, we did a little homework on Cambly and yourself, and we had some factoids for everyone to understand a little bit about the success. So, uh, one of the things that we've read in this Forbes article is unlike other language apps.

So, a lot of language apps, I didn't realize this, they're actually nonprofit. They're not in the [inaudible 00:15:39] Cambly. You guys are on a mission to change that trend. When you first got going, from what we read is, you had a very difficult time raising money for this. Is that accurate?

Sameer Shariff:

Yeah. Yeah, we did.

Albert Chou:

When you pitch this idea to them, what were they getting hung up on the, like the resistance points? Like, what were, what did they say? What did the naysayers say? Like, "Oh, this is the reason why I can't fund you. It's because bam."

Sameer Shariff:

Uh, yeah, and I talked about kind of the early days a bunch and how-

Albert Chou:

Yeah.

Sameer Shariff:

You know, we were the only two tutors. Cambly have scaled immensely since then.

Albert Chou:

(laughs)

Sameer Shariff:

Uh, we have a huge community of tutors. To give you a sense of it, you know, in the early days, we were, we were doing all the tutoring ourselves. Today, we do over one year of one-on-one tutoring, uh, every single day. Uh, and so it gives you kind of a sense of the sheer volume of tutoring that we're doing. And I think that puts us at one of the largest, if not the largest, one-on-one tutoring platforms in the world. And so we've come, come a very, very long way since then. But yeah, it was, it was not a, you know,



perfectly smooth road, uh (laughs), you know, every step of the way. And, and fundraising was definitely challenging for Cambly. And to be honest, it was, it was harder than I thought. Um, it kind of came down to a couple things that made it initially really hard to raise for the, for the company. I think one is there had been a handful of companies that had come before us that tried to build something in language learning, and um, you know, they- they had trouble getting the- the traction, you know, giving investors returns. And so we were, we were kind of following that path. And then the second thing is, I think what I touched on earlier, like, this isn't a problem that the English speaking world really thinks about at all.

And what that means is when we would, uh, talk to an investor, uh, who naturally spoke English, you know, spoke English, grew up speaking English, like, they just weren't aware of the problem. Like, you know, they, when they look around, it was not a problem that they had, anyone they knew had. And so we had to kind of educate them on, "Hey. Hey, this is actually like, I know, you don't have this problem yourself, and neither do I, but this is an enormous problem in the world. It's just like a blind spot for all of us English speakers."

And so I would go with questions about like, Are people actually like trying to learn English? Are people spending money to learn English? It's like, "Yes. Actually, there's, you know, billions and billions of dollars spent on this problem. We just, we just don't see it." And so I think, I think that made it more challenging than it is to kind of, I think, raise for problems you see every day. And I think what that meant for us is we just had to get to like, bigger milestones in order to, to get the fundraise done and so, um, compared to kind of a- a comparable company in a different space.

Albert Chou:

Do people give you any type of feedback regarding its, I guess, effectiveness? Because like you mentioned in the article in Forbes, there's a lot of, there's a lot of language apps out there. Most of them are, they're more geared around like, "Hey, I have an algorithm or I have a process that you can learn." So I've tried, I will say I tried Duolingo to help because I can understand Mandarin, but I can't actually read Chinese. Like, I just can't.

I can't recognize all the characters, like I struggle. And I fell off. I mean, I definitely fell off. There's probably many reasons why, but I didn't continue doing it. I know that. Have you heard any, like, anecdotal or do you have any data that suggests, "Okay, this is a more effective way to learn?" Because I was thinking about what you're saying, like for those who want to just colloquially learn English, maybe those apps aren't as good. Maybe this is the way to go.

Sameer Shariff:

Yeah. So I think there's a couple, couple things there. Like one, when you say, "I want to learn Mandarin," what's kind of behind that statement? Basically, like, I think usually the case is, it's not that you want to learn like, a few words in, in Mandarin or learn how to like string a sentence together, whatever. Right? Like, uh, I think what likely, what you likely mean is I'd like to be able to interact in a real time conversation-

Albert Chou:

Yes.

Sameer Shariff:



With someone who speaks Mandarin. I think that's usually what it means. When I, when I say I wanted to learn Spanish, when someone says they want to learn Italian, right? Like that's kind of usually what it means.

Albert Chou:

Yeah, I'm not trying to read a textbook. (laughs)

Sameer Shariff:

Exactly, yeah so. But I think what's funny is, although that is your goal, is to be able to speak the language, often what people do, is they do everything, but actually practice speaking that language. And when, when you think about it, like you don't typically get good at something by like not doing the thing.

Albert Chou:

(laughs)

Sameer Shariff:

Like, like if you want to get good at something, you kind of have to do it. I joke about how, you know, imagine if you were like, I want to become a great skier, like I'm gonna get like the top selling ski book from Amazon. I'm gonna read it cover to cover. Then, we go to the top of the mountain, like it's going to be ridiculous.

Albert Chou:

I'm going to interview some Olympians. I'm going to interview Lindsey Vonn. (laughs)

Sameer Shariff:

Exactly, yeah. So, you're not, you gotta, you gotta like practice the skill that you want to learn. And so, it's not that people don't get this about languages. Like, people understand that. It just, it's a lot easier to like, get a textbook, uh, or- or listen to something, uh, you know, watch a video than it is to practice in a real time conversation, because it just, it's harder to create that for yourself. It's harder to access someone who speaks English one on one and that's kind of what we set out to change. That's kind of where Cambly fits into the, these language learning tools out there. And, and the second thing you mentioned around, like you falling off, I think there's some interesting stuff there as well.

Like, people use Cambly for years. In a lot of ways, like learning a language, it's like a lifelong journey, like you don't just have to learn it, but you have to actually continue to exercise the skill over time. Otherwise, you'll lose it. And yeah, not to, not to make too many athletic analogies, but I think, uh, you know, I run pretty regularly.

Like, if you imagine me saying, "Hey, like, you know, I run a seven mile for five miles one day," and I'm like, "Great, I'm done." I'm like, "I'm finished for life." That's kind of not how it works. Like, I'll get really out of shape if I stop there. Like, you kind of need to continue to exercise the muscle. And I think speaking a language works the same way. The reason that we continue to be good at English is because we exercise that skill, like all day, every day. I mean, you literally do it as a (laughs), as a profession, right?

Albert Chou:

Yeah.

Sameer Shariff:

So we're like, "Oh, I learned English and I can always speak English." But if you're a, you know, Japanese businessman, and you have like, an occasional meeting with, uh, the American team. Uh, like you, like you kind of don't want to be like dusting off your rusty skills in that meeting. You kind of want to be prepped for that. You want to like, go in and know what you're doing. And you have to practice that skill outside of it in order to kind of maintain it. And so I think, you know, why, why do people use Cambly for years? It's because, yeah, you kind of have to keep using the service in order to maintain the skill.

Albert Chou:

Yeah.

Sameer Shariff:

And then the other thing is, you know, there's a really like, human-to-human connection that happens on Cambly. Like, you connect with your tutor. People become actually quite close and so-

Albert Chou:

I was gonna say, it's kind of like an entertainment element almost to it.

Sameer Shariff:

It's really fun. And I think the way we've set up, the- the product, like it, because it's not like necessarily like a teacher going through like-

Albert Chou:

A course.

Sameer Shariff:

A- a lesson.

Albert Chou:

Yeah.

Sameer Shariff:

Like yeah, it's like, "Hey, if you like soccer a lot, like let's talk about that." Right? Like, you can kind of take it where you want. You can take it where it's valuable. You can take it where it's interesting to you. You don't get bored because it's one on one, right? You can, you can focus on what, what's going to be useful and valuable for you. And then you end up building really like close relationships with, with your tutor. And the same way you wouldn't like, stand your, your friend up for dinner, uh, you know, you- you also kind of like want to like show up for your tutor.

Like there's, there's a person on the other end of this. And so I think it both makes it much more fun and rewarding and interesting. And there's this human-to-human elephant that, that makes people want to stick around. And you just don't get that from a product that's like just software. And you don't really

get that from a massive online course where like, no one really cares whether you show up or not. And so I think it's something that's pretty unique about a service like Cambly.

Albert Chou:

So when, as you're talking about this, I, I think about how you, how you hit on a lot of notes of, you know, for me learning a foreign language is exactly, you hit on some of the things that I didn't like about it. Like, for example, like in any, any foreign language app, you have to learn about like food or meals, right? It's like, I don't want to learn how to read or say white rice. I already know how to say that, you know. Like, let's move on. Let's, let's talk about, like you said, "I want to talk about something fun."

Then, I translated that over to like, "Okay, what must the feature set in the software start becoming able to do because some tutors might be more demand than others." And then what happens in these Marketplace application software is it usually has to get, like they have to get really good at suddenly applying filters without making you choose them every single time. That's exactly what Zillow has done. That's what, like we already said, Uber and Lyft. They've all done that, right? They basically figured out, "Hey, you normally like to take this type of car." So, the default is going to be this type of car. "Hey, you normally go to these places." These are the people in your area. Like they, they go to great lengths so that you, the consumer, don't have to select things along the way.

Are you kind of in the same mode and model like, because I'm guessing you have the same problems, like some of the tutors probably are more popular? Maybe they want to, uh, you know, they don't have as much availability. I'm thinking, like Airbnb. Like if I have a more popular house, I have a higher rate, you know. I have less availability.

Like, there's a lot of things that go into it. And I have more demand. What, what are some of the things you're seeing in the marketplace? Because you're prob- it's similar, but it's also different. I didn't know like, as you're seeing increased growth and usage, what does it mean for you and your engineering team? What are you guys solving for, I guess, now?

Sameer Shariff:

Yeah, there's, there's a lot in there around, um, around matching.

Albert Chou:

Yeah.

Sameer Shariff:

We made some parallels with Uber, uh, around like, simplicity of the app and this on demand experience. This is actually an- an area where we're quite different from Uber. Because if you want to take a- a trip, you know, you want to head to the airport, uh, you kind of have a baseline. You want a safe driver, but you kind of don't really care that much about who- who gets you there as long as you get there safely. Right?

Albert Chou:

Yeah, it's, it's just a much more commoditized service. There's more similarities between providers than tutoring (laughs) or conversation.

Sameer Shariff:

Exactly, yeah. So, so to take it to Cambly, uh, that, you know, if you're gonna spend like hours upon hours talking one on one with his tutor, like, you care very deeply about who that tutor is. And so, it's not that there, that there's like the perfect tutor for everyone. There, it's a match, right? Like, you need to find someone who's a really good fit for you. And the dimensionality of that match is- is quite large actually. If you think about, like, you know, the people you get along with in your life, and why you like them. Uh, I mean, humans are complex creatures.

There, you know, there's a lot of, a lot of depth and dimensionality to us. So, there's a lot of different ways you can do that match. And so that's, that's something that like, you know, in the very early days, you know, we set out to say, "Hey, we're gonna deliver you a friendly native English speaker, um, over video chat. "But, but actually, the dream, the vision there was always that we're not just gonna give you a friendly native English speaker, but we're gonna get you the perfect person for you. Like, maybe they share your interests. Maybe they share your style or personality. Maybe you have the same occupation, which is a, which is a dimension that has a lot of carnality to it.

There's a lot of different occupations out there. That was always the vision. We want to get you your English speaking counterpart, if you will. And so that's kind of where we've headed. You can obviously get much better at that, as you scale because you just have a much bigger population and pool of tutors to pull from. We've gotten way, way better at that over the years, but I think we could get far, far better than where we are today. And you know, some of the things you touched on about the tutors that are really busy.

Like, you- you don't want to point every student at the same tutor because that's gonna, that tutor is going to fill up, and it's going to be kind of a bad experience for, for every student. It's a matching problem from like, What is the right tutor for each person? And that, that answer could differ. Uh, it's personalized to you. And it's also a matching problem of like, you want to distribute the, the demand across the population of tutors you have.

Albert Chou:

Yeah. Some of the things you hit on were-. Now that you said it, it's quite obvious. Like, you know, the occupation, it makes sense. "Hey, I want to talk about work." Especially you said, "Hey, there's a lot of people want to learn English because they want to maybe do a better life for themselves."

So, if I'm a, let's say I'm a healthcare worker, like I'm a healthcare worker, and I want to be able to know these terms in English, uh, it makes total sense that I want someone on the other side that is in the same domain. What other things have you, I guess, because you've been, you've been at it for a little over five years?

Sameer Shariff:

Oh, yeah. Longer, actually. We did, we did Y Combinator back in 2014. And, uh, we've, we've been doing business for some time.

Albert Chou:

Okay, so you guys been grinding at it. What, what other things have you uncovered? Because these are things that like I, like I, like I just said, it's clearly obvious when you say them, but I don't think they were obvious when you were probably building it. (laughs) You were like, "Oh, this is what people want. (laughs)

Sameer Shariff:

Yeah. Yeah, you touched on it earlier. Like, you know, you hate when you're learning a language that you be like, learn how to say white rice every time. Right?

Albert Chou:

Yeah. (laughs)

Sameer Shariff:

Like, I think that's like, I think one of the powerful things about that the platform we've built is, we try to quickly get you out of that. Right?

Albert Chou:

Yeah.

Sameer Shariff:

And so, uh, you know, you know you mentioned this health care worker. I think you see this across. I think occupation is actually, I think, a really interesting one because people are using Cambly because there, uh, we have a lot of young professionals on the platform. They're using it because they want to get that, that promotion. They want to get that new job. Um, and so they don't want to learn like everyday English. They don't want to learn to say foods or "Hi," "Hello, how are you?" Like, they want to learn the, the specific terminology and language they need in their job. And that might be like, pretty niche, right? Like, if you're a business person, like-

Albert Chou:

Oh, yeah.

Sameer Shariff:

Maybe you're learning about like, you know, customer lifetime value, and like, customer acquisition costs. Like, it's like-

Albert Chou:

Yeah.

Sameer Shariff:

Those are just not everyday languages. Same thing with like, I come from software engineering. There's a whole set of language that we use that's very specific to our field. When you can connect people who knows that terminology, who knows your industry, it's really, really powerful. And we, we see this actually a lot. Like, one example that popped up, that I think is pretty memorable is, we had, um, some Turkish pilots start using Cambly. And we're like, that's kind of interesting.

Like, why are these pilots using Cambly? And, and we, you know, we zoomed in, we looked at one of them, and one, one had found a- a tutor that, uh, had aviation experience. And so, uh, they could, they could speak in the, in the right language and the right terminology. And, and as we kind of dove into like, what's going on with these pilots, uh, what we found is, you know, if you're a, you're a Turkish pilot and you only speak Turkish, you can fly anywhere you want within Turkey. But if you want to fly internationally, uh, English is the official language of air traffic control.

And so, uh, basically, he was able to, uh, improve his English enough to go, to pass an exam that let him then basically get a promotion and start flying international routes. That's one example. But you see this kind of in every industry, all over the place. Like, English is like, you know, often this, it's less about the, the skills and talent you have and more about, "If only I could speak English, these are all the doors that would open for me." Uh, and so yeah, I think that, that one I think is, is interesting. And yeah, you see a lot of examples similar to that.

Albert Chou:

I did not even think about that. So like even if, if I was a pilot and I wanted to fly, let's say to a tropical island, like I want to fly to Bali, the Bali air traffic controllers speak English.

Sameer Shariff:

Yeah.

Albert Chou:

They probably speak Bahasa and Indonesian and they speak English.

Sameer Shariff:

Yeah.

Albert Chou:

That's what you're saying?

Sameer Shariff:

It's a, it's a, it'd be a tricky problem if a, if, uh, pilots and air traffic control couldn't communicate. And so, uh, that's one of those things-

Albert Chou:

Yeah. So this is, these things are clearly obvious when they're stated, but when you, I mean, unless you put some thought into it, you don't really know.

Sameer Shariff:

Yeah, definitely.

Albert Chou:

You are here. Like you said, your platform is trying to match people with a good fit, right? And so, what are other matches exist besides, uh, occupation? It's pretty fascinating.

Sameer Shariff:

I, I didn't touch on this, but we have a kids' product as well. And so, uh, it, it, it looks a little bit different. But, uh, we actually just a couple weeks ago, we had one of our like, uh, subscribers to the kids' product visit at the office, I'm talking to this kid. He's 11 years old. As I learned more about him, he- he had been using Cambly Kids for about a year and a half at this point. And when he started, he basically didn't know English at all.

And here he was standing in front of me like, talking really confidently in English, just incredibly moving and inspiring moment. He's young, like he's got his whole life ahead of him to benefit from, from that skill, and it's just gonna open so many doors for him. And then he's got two younger sisters. So, they saw his success learning English and then they started using Cambly Kids as well. I think his mom started using Cam- the Cambly product a bit.

And so, it's just like the whole family became like a Cambly family. Like just, I think the, you know, when I think about that, I think that's kind of like what really excites me about what we're doing and why it's, uh, you know, the, the impact we can have on those people's lives.

Albert Chou:

So I'm thinking, because you already, you clearly have already identified yourself as a big sports fan. And I'm thinking back to watching sports and learning about international players. And like, they would always kind of share with you, "Hey, how did someone learn English?" Because I remember, because you'd mentioned this kid, like Vlade Divac was an NBA player back, uh, in the early 2000s, late 90s and he learned how to speak English watching the Flintstones. And I'm thinking like, in the future, there's probably going to be NBA players that are like, "Oh, how did you learn how to speak English?" "Some random guy on Cambly." (laughs)

You know, man. Like, it is, it is a possibility. For yourself, you've been maniacally focused, is one of the things that we see in every article about you, about Cambly. It's like, "Okay, this is an English- this is for people that want to learn how to speak English." And I'm sure. Or actually I'm not sure. Do other investors, do they want to pull you in other directions? Do they say, "Hey, you need to add more languages?" Like, "This is how- this is the future. You've got it, but you got to add more languages."

What is your philosophy on adding more languages? Because I know right now, very clearly, you guys establish this as for English, learning English, which is really cool to see that you're ne-, like you're going deep into, uh, like a level of expertise, but I didn't know. Are other languages on your horizon or do you think they'll ever be on your horizon?

Sameer Shariff:

So, so it's interesting. I, I definitely get that question a lot. And when I was getting started with Cambly, uh, I think my perspective might, maybe somewhat naive perspective in lots of ways. Uh, but my, my, my perspective is sort of, "Oh, yeah, we'll, we'll do English. We'll figure that out. We'll solve that and then we'll move on to other languages." Maybe we'll move on to other types of things you can provide, uh, one on one. I mean, it's a one-on-one conversation with someone who's like an expert in something. Like, you can imagine all the ways you could expand into other areas. And interestingly, I think the longer I've worked on this problem, the more I've become more and more, like focused on English specifically.

You know, we touched on some of the numbers. There are like six billion people that don't know English. There are the 1.5 billion that are actively trying to learn it right now. Cambly has done incredibly well. We've, we've scaled a ton. You know, we talked about how far we've come over the years. Uh, but when we, when we look at where we are today, compared to the, the 1.5 billion people that are trying to learn English right now, we're kind of a, we're a speck in, in, in that market. Like, we are still really, really small. We've got, you know, far, far more ahead of us than behind us at this point. So yeah, we're, we're focused on English.

We're, we're all in on English. And I think what happens with that focus, you can do things within, uh, like education, that I think you likely wouldn't prioritize if you were thinking about lots of other stuff.



And so, you know, a lot of the matching things we talked about, the fact that like, you can find a tutor that's like a really good match for you in a bunch of ways, the special- type of specialized curriculum we might want to build for people with certain occupations that want to learn English, not just everyday English, but English for their job. Like, those sort of things, like when you go really, really deep, and you're like, "I'm going to solve this problem as- you know.

What is the most incredible experience I can deliver on?" I think the focus on English has really helped with that. And we're also building a marketplace so like, practically speaking, when you think about building liquidity, you might think about liquidity as "Oh, I just need enough tutors." But actually you need enough tutors that are like, you know, if you want to deliver the best experience you can, you want enough tutors that are like, perfect in all the right dimensions for you if you want to use a service right now. Um, and one of those dimensions, by the way, is, is time. Like, there's a temporal component as well.

Like, you could have the perfect tutor, but, Albert, if you wanted to talk now and that perfect tutor is only available in the middle of night for you, like that's not going to solve anything. And so, um, you don't just need like a- enough liquidity to like, give you the perfect person, but you need to, want enough liquidity to give you the perfect person right now. And so, these are all things, I think, just building out liquidity in the marketplace, if you were to start focusing on other languages, you just, you lose a lot of the, the power you get there.

Albert Chou:

Listen, Sameer. I love it, man. I think you're like a Chick-fil-A of learning languages. Right? Of course, you could do more things, but then we won't be the best at this.

Sameer Shariff:

Right. My wife is a huge Chick-fil-A fan so she'll appreciate that analogy.

Albert Chou:

There you go. Yeah, exactly. I'm sure people are asking, "Well hey, can you add this?" "No." "Can you open on Sunday?" "No." Right? We're focused on what we do. And I think that is a, it's a noble trait for sure. Interestingly, I see it work more than not work. You know what I mean? Like, focusing going deep in vertical. And like you said, I liked the way you put it, "There's more in front of you than behind you." Right? You got customers today, but until you have 1.5 billion learners-

Sameer Shariff:

Yeah.

Albert Chou:

You got more to go, right? (laughs)

Sameer Shariff:

We got no shortage of English learners right now. That is not the, not the bottleneck of the business. And so, uh yeah, until, until it becomes it, I think we've, we've got, you know, we're gonna keep focusing on that.

Albert Chou:

Well, Sameer, it was awesome having you on the show. It was really interesting hearing, the way you framed it up is, is very clear. Like, I think the way you, what you've done is you've made it very clear as why your service matters. You know, IT Visionaries, we get a lot of tech companies that want to come on the show and we were like, "Well, what's the difference between this and all the other language, uh, language companies?" So, I think you were very clear in defining like, what it's for, who uses it.

Once you started hitting on some of the value props, I could understand it very, very quickly. Right? I don't want to learn how to say chicken in Spanish. Like, I know what that is and I don't want it to repeat in my lesson. I want to have fun. Like you said, serve conversations, things that I'm interested in. It makes total sense. And I can see- and I, and I, and I picked up on like this can become entertainment almost, like, like pet, like the new pen pals. I don't know.

Sameer Shariff:

I love it.

Albert Chou:

But Sameer, it was awesome having you on the show. But before you go, it is time for the Lightning Round. The Lightning Round is brought to us by Salesforce Platform, the #1 cloud platform for digital transformation you've ever experienced.

Sameer, this is where we ask you questions outside of the world of work so that the audience can get to know you a little better. You ready?

Sameer Shariff:

Let's do it. Yeah.

Albert Chou:

Did you ever successfully learn Spanish?

Sameer Shariff:

Oh, man. You're gonna put me on the spot on this, huh? I, uh, I get better at it when I'm in a Spanish speaking country. But I sadly, you know, have not, have not kept up with it as well as I would like to.

Albert Chou:

Okay, do you watch Spanish shows?

Sameer Shariff:

I do not, but I should.

Albert Chou:

(laughs) Because one of my favorite shows is, I mean, mostly in Spanish, Narcos. And I, and I was trying. I cannot keep up though.

Sameer Shariff:

Okay.

Albert Chou:

I do feel like people that speak Spanish, speak at a faster rate.

Sameer Shariff:

I'll take the recommendation. My son is in a, in a bilingual Spanish-English school right now. And so, uh, my failures, I'm, I'm trying to set him up for success, so.

Albert Chou:

We're not failures. It's just temporary. You're just on pause, baby.

Sameer Shariff:

Just temporary. (laughing)

Albert Chou:

You're still the boss. You're working on other things.

Sameer Shariff:

He just breaks out. He was singing Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star in Spanish this morning when I was getting him breakfast. So he's, he's just showing off.

Albert Chou:

Hey, but you understood. So, hey, you got something. You got something there.

Sameer Shariff:

Yeah.

Albert Chou:

You mentioned before you're a big traveler. Where some of your favorite places you've been? And of course, we also want to know where would you like to go?

Sameer Shariff:

Uh, so yeah, that's a tough one because I love, I love traveling. Uh, I went to French Polynesia, with my wife for a honeymoon. That was, that was pretty incredible for like, just a beautiful, amazing beach. But I also love, what I love about traveling is the culture. And so I love going to places where people speak a different language and you can learn a different culture. And so, I really enjoyed going to places like Japan. Uh, the food is also incredible there. And so that doesn't hurt. Yeah, there's so many, so many places, uh, so many places that I've, that I've been, that I, that I really enjoy, but there's a couple for you.

Albert Chou:

There you go. If I were to buy you a plane ticket, I could buy you a plane ticket anywhere in the world. Where are you going right now?

Sameer Shariff:

I'd love to go somewhere new. So, I, I- you mentioned Indonesia earlier. That, that sounds, that sounds great. I haven't been there before, so.

Albert Chou:

There you go.

Sameer Shariff:

I'll, I'll go with India, Indonesia.

Albert Chou:

I'll see you Bali. All right. We kind of picked up you might be a sports fan. Are you a sports fan?

Sameer Shariff:

Uh, I would say I'm, I'm, I'm not a sports watching fan, but I, but I enjoy participating. I'm a bit of a, bit of an adrenaline junkie.

Albert Chou:

Oh, yeah?

Sameer Shariff:

Uh, and so I, I yeah. I kind of have been for a while. And so when I was, when I was growing up, I got into lots of extreme sport type things. And then actually my parents were great. They, they really like, encouraged me and my, my siblings to, to do, do some of these, these things, which even though they didn't, they weren't really that interested in themselves. And so, you know, whether it was like, whitewater rafting-

Albert Chou:

There you go.

Sameer Shariff:

Or skiing, uh, you know. I really wanted to, like I got really interested in hang gliding and so they found a way to like, make that happen for us. When I actually convinced my parents to, for my 18th birthday, to give me a skydiving package, 18 is like the youngest age you can. You're legally allowed to skydive, uh, in the U.S. And so that's what I did for my 18th birthday.

Uh, and then I ended up getting really into it and stopping just one jump shy of, of getting, getting licensed at skydiving. And so, I kind of always had an interest in that sort of stuff. As I mentioned, I have a wife and two kids now. Uh, and so I've, I've gotten a little bit more tamed with my extracurriculars, but, uh, but I still enjoy kind of getting, getting on the slopes and doing skiing and things like that.

Albert Chou:

Alright, now I got to ask. If your son or your children come to you and say, "Hey, Dad, I want to be like you pops. I want to hit the skydives, 18 years old?" Are you supporting that or are you saying, "Hey, I'm not paying for that."

Sameer Shariff:

Uh, I'm definitely, I'm definitely in for it. Uh, it has to, probably has to be a discussion with the wife on whether she signs off for it as well. (laughing) But I'm down for it. I think they were always, they were always calculated, uh, calculated risks. So, yeah. If he's doing something that I think is actually really dangerous, then I might say, "Hey, let's, let's reconsider this." But I think a lot of those things are not quite as dangerous as they sound.

Albert Chou:

I agree. I agree. I'm, I'm in the same boat. The only thing I used to do is I used to ride motorcycles and looking back on it, I was like, I would say to my son, "Hey, I'm, I'm not going to buy you one." I would not buy my son a motorcycle. (laughs)

Sameer Shariff:

Yeah, that's, that's a, that's a no for me, too. I would love to ride a motorcycle and I've never. I've never gotten one because I know it is one of those things that is actually dangerous.

Albert Chou:

Yeah, on a track. I would say yes to a track.

Sameer Shariff:

Okay. Good to know.

Albert Chou:

There you go. Just a track.

Sameer Shariff:

Good to know. (laughs)

Albert Chou:

All right. Sameer, it was awesome having you on the show. Thanks for sharing what you have built at Cambly. For anyone interested, it is spelled C-A-M-B-L-Y. As always, it will be linked in the show notes. If you're interested in learning English or teaching English, being a tutor, it sounds like Sameer, you're open for both sides. You need both sides.

Sameer Shariff:

Yes. And we are, we are actively hiring as well. And so if you're excited about our mission, we would love to have, have you come join us, so.

Albert Chou:

There you go. Listen, I love it. The Chick-fil-A of languages. That's my man, Sameer. Cambly. Check it out.

Sameer Shariff:

This transcript was exported on Nov 02, 2022 - view latest version [here](#).

That's, that's great.

Albert Chou:

And listen, I'm going to try it out myself because like I said, I saw a benefit for myself. It was just like if I got someone on the other end that was going from Mandarin to English, it would give me a chance to practice as well.

Sameer Shariff:

Yeah, we- you're a professional conversationalist. So we'd love, you'd be a great tutor. We'd love to have you.

Albert Chou:

I don't know about that. (laughs)

We'll find out. I don't want to get my one star reviews. (laughs)

Sameer Shariff, thanks for joining us today on IT Visionaries.

Sameer Shariff:

This was a super fun conversation. Thanks so much for having me.