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**Number of word in national language**: 1089

THE MYTH OF THE OLD-FASHIONED BRAILLE - A TECHNOLOGICAL DEAD EN

We who are well acquainted with Braille know that the brilliant invention of Louis Braille will be irreplaceable for a large number of people who do not have sufficient visual ability to benefit proficiently from a visually written language.

The technological development for this group of people is hindered by inaccurate argumentation claiming that people with severe visual impairment or blindness «luckily» no longer need to be able to read as technology for text to speech and speech to text has come so far that it is unnecessary and too cumbersome to learn to read and write Braille. It is assumed, without further expertise, that it is both easier and simpler to listen to text read aloud, or to record your own text. Less resources used in both teaching and for special equipment is also highlighted as an important advantage.

All persons able to make use of a written language must have the right to learn to read and write. Even in today’s high-tech society, being able to read and write gives a certain degree of status. Through such skill-sets independence and the ability to master life is expressed, not to mention the added opportunity to acquire knowledge. The ability to read and write are basic skills society expects of reasonably well functioning people. When sight is inadequate, participation in society is already considerably limited. If access to the written language diminishes, life can become a lot harder. Mastering a written language is an important part of access to education and employment. Investing in sound education and facilitation for active and functional use of Braille is therefore an economically smart initiative for society. With an increased amount of active readers of Braille, the demand for contemporary technology would grow, contributing to increased developmental conditions. Increased accessibility, usage and visibility are important steps towards raising the status of Braille, as well as eradicating the myth of an old-fashioned and cumbersome written language, with no future.

Being able to read and write is of great importance for the individual’s linguistic awareness and affects our ability to control how we express ourselves.

It is important to have the basic understanding of the smallest units of the language, how the language is structured and how interactions between words function in a sentence, in addition to their role in the development of content in a text. Lack of knowledge and skills in these areas can give poor results when computer technology is used to create a product using speech to text.

Every now and then, we have to smile at strange wording and considerable errors, which can completely change the meaning of the text. We can all make such mistakes, but it is not amusing when such clumsy texts are the best one is able to produce. This can easily become a reality when speech technology is the only tool for creating text, in combination with limited writing experience. Illiteracy is not helped by speech-based technology alone, as it can just as easily contribute to increased social inequalities. Such practise puts people in a vulnerable and dependant position regarding technology.

Many have found that “two ears and one brain” do not suffice to effectively listen to spoken text while following a lecture, participating in group work, or when giving an oral presentation. When we read, we tend to relate more actively to the text than when it is read to us. This affects our awareness, understanding and as a result our reading experience. A greater control and overview of a text also makes it easier to go back to the place one "lost the thread". The speed is usually somewhat slower when reading Braille, but many still experience timesaving as the details of the text are both understood and remembered more easily, creating less need for repetition than with techniques involving listening to a text. When producing texts yourself, it is important to get an overview and be able to read what one has written, so that editing can be done both efficiently and accurately.

Braille can be produced with simple tools, which makes us a little less vulnerable when technology fails. The various signs and symbols of the written language are used in many contexts unrelated to technology. In everyday-life without the aid of sight, this becomes even more important.

Braille is used for everything from reading books and documents to project-work, small notes, to-do lists, organizing toys and games, labelling household items, medicines, food, clothing, important documents, tools, crafts, in public places etc. Reading to children and grandchildren provides an encouraging role model for reading, and it gives a much-welcomed opportunity for mutual attention and interaction with the children. The list can go on and on, showing just how crucial the written language is for participation in the many different activities of daily life.

Good Braille readers are admired and fascinate people when observed reading on the train, in the cafe or on a bench in the park, but ignorance and the tenacious myths still linger on. Maybe attitudes can be changed if we bring Braille even more out of the classroom, reading hall, office or armchair. It requires courage and strength to campaign for increased accessibility where Braille is utilised to a greater extent in the public arena. The world must comprehend the enormous importance of being able to read and write, even for people who do not see.

A lot of work remains to be done to draw attention to this fantastic written language and to spread information of the endless possibilities that lie within the invention of Braille, if we only allow it to be part of the technological development. There lies a major challenge in creating understanding of speech technology being a flexible and positive tool in everyday life of the visually impaired, but that it cannot replace the many functions that lie within the written language. Most people understand that it is difficult to nail a nail without a hammer. Why is it then so problematic to see the importance of a well-equipped toolbox needed in an everyday life that demands flexibility, efficiency and accuracy?

Being able to read and write is an essential part of functioning in day-to-day life, active participation in society and acceptable living conditions. In this context, Braille is valuable as a written language for the future, as long as it keeps up with development.