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Number of words in the national language: 973

**Braille to Touch**

You are asking me why the Braille is so important in my life. The answer is very simple:

Because I did not have any other choice.

My parents started reading me a lot of books when I was about two years old. But as they kept reading, I got more and more hungry for books and asked them to read more. It was not until I learned Braille that I let them stop because I had the freedom of reading on my own whenever I wanted.

After I learned Braille, I turned into a real bookworm and finished all the books at our school library. I would read whenever I had the opportunity.

At school, I had to read, write and learn. The Braille responded to all of my needs. With the Braille, I could read texts with my own voice. This helped me find my own ‘tune’ and has improved my imagination. Besides, it allowed me to read and learn at my own speed.

It might seem funny to you, but I am a visual learner. I learn better if I touch things and visualize their shapes in my mind. For a visual learner like me, Braille is the best choice. I can memorize the shapes of Braille texts and remember the information in these shapes. I never forget it.

When sighted people read too much, their eyes hurt. My index finger hurts when I read a lot. But I LOVE this pain because it is a good payoff. I believe there is no learning without payoffs.

It’s a pity that Braille has lost its popularity through time. But what happened to it? Why don't we use Braille as much as we used to?

Yes, I can hear your answers... Audio technologies. Do you think this answer is enough for us?

I don't think so.

Before Braille blind people could read by listening. Louis Braille invented the Braille alphabet. which enabled us to read and write. Audio technologies are not barriers for it.

The only barrier is ourselves. We do not give enough importance to the Braille to grow.

Yes, I know. Publishing texts written in Braille is not cheap. These texts take more space than the print texts or audio files, which makes them difficult to carry. But, there are refreshable Braille displays that can be connected to the computer and makes the texts possible to read on the computer screen.

Oh, I hear you …

They are expensive. They cost almost as much as a computer and they only read texts, not graphics. I’m sure if Louis Braille were alive, he would try to invent a display which includes graphics. Technology would allow him now. As far as I know, displays including graphics will be available soon. But we have to be patient… The marketing process is very slow. They cannot keep up with today’s audio technologies.

You might say reading by listening to audio books is much better than braille because it is faster.

NOT AT ALL!

When listening to audio books you need to focus more, and you might easily get distracted. Besides, when you read Braille, you create the scenes through your imagination. You are not affected by the reader’s tone of voice or intonation. Through Braille, the stories become a part of you because they come to life through your own visualization.

Many people think that visually impaired people read slowly in Braille. It may be true to a certain extent. Why? Because we cannot access Braille as easily as sighted people can access to print. For them, the texts are everywhere. They can start practicing reading from the moment they learn how to read and write. How can WE practice and develop our literacy?

The answer brings up another question: How can the Braille be used more often?

Let me tell you about a very important tool called Optacon developed almost fifty years ago. Oh, its name should be written with golden letters. It is a real facilitator for visually impaired people to learn.

It includes a camera that works on contrasts and a lot of pins. When we put our finger on these pins, we can touch whatever the camera shows. The animals and plants whose names we can only hear in the documentaries are a ‘pin away from us’. Moreover, we can understand Math. Topics such as derivative integral limits and geometric problems come to us much more clearly.

Unfortunately, the tool came out with its drawbacks: It is somewhat noisy and the vibration of the pins make the finger numb after a certain time for instance. The problem could have been solved if enough attention had been given. Instead, unfortunately it has gone out of production.

If its production would have continued, we would have known the world by looking at the maps, we would have drawn a building or a road. Learning Japanese letters wouldn’t have been that difficult for me.

I imagine a machine which includes a braille display and an Optacon. A cheaper braille display probably worked with air pressure and integrated into an Optacon, then the pins would work on the air pressure system without much noise for instance. The machine could also include an OCR system to scan a text. If the text is hand-written, we could read it with the Optacon side of the machine, if not, we could use the Braille side. So, it will be useful for people who do not know how to use Braille.

Do you think Louis Braille would work on such a machine? With the technology available now, he would feel sorry if he didn’t.

I would like to believe that there are other Louis Brailles out there who are working on creating technologies that will enable us to discover the world with our fingers and help us integrate more.