

USAGE OF BRAILLE IN MALAYSIA: AN ASSESSMENT

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This article gives an assessment of the usage of Braille in Malaysia. It gives the background of the introduction and development of Braille in Malaysia and makes recommendations for the establishment of a national Braille authority to coordinate development of Braille publications and act as a point of reference for Braille in Malaysia.

Keywords: Braille, adaptive computer equipment

The system of Braille writing had made its mark in Malaysia long before the country achieved independence. Braille was introduced to Malaysia by some Anglican medical missionaries when they opened a school for the blind which became known as St. Nicholas School for the Blind. The school was first opened in Melaka in 1926 which was then moved to Pulau Pinang six years later. Since then, many blind students have passed out of the school and have obtained employment in line with their academic qualifications.

The Specialist Teachers' Training Institute has been responsible for training teachers in education of the blind. Currently, several other institutions of higher education are also involved in preparing teachers for the blind such as Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) and Universiti Perguruan Sultan Idris (UPSI).

Concerning the production of Braille materials, the Malaysian Association for the Blind (MAB) is one of the organisations which used to run a Braille production book publishing service for the benefit of blind users. St. Nicholas School in Pulau Pinang and Princess Elizabeth School in Johor Bahru continue to produce their own Braille materials for the use of their clients only.

In the early 1980s the Ministry of Education established its own Braille publishing unit which had its operations on the premises of the Setapak Special Secondary School for the blind in Kuala Lumpur. Subsequently, the unit was closed down and the production of Braille books reverted to Malaysian Association for the Blind (MAB).

As I see it, this shifting and changing in Braille production has caused much confusion and inconsistency with regards to the usage of Braille in our country. There seems to have been the lack of proper regulations in running a Braille production unit for the blind in Malaysia.

There has been a lack of coordination among the bodies involved in Braille production too. Government agencies and non-governmental organizations each had their own formats for Braille production.

When the Braille production unit of the Ministry of Education was dissolved in the mid-1990s, the production of Braille textbooks was greatly affected. Thus, at one stage, the Special Education Department (currently, the Special Education Division) had to organise workshops on Braille textbook production for special teachers of the blind.

Concerning the preparation of question papers for public examinations, the Lembaga Peperiksaan (LP) and Majlis Peperiksaan Malaysia (MPM) were responsible for carrying out this task. After I joined LP in October 2005, I noticed that the officers appeared to have little knowledge regarding the current practices in Braille usage. When I tried to point out their errors and inform them of the latest development in Braille, one of them enquired whether there had been any circular or memo for the changes and amendments to be made.

Among the NGOs, on the other hand, MAB has been playing that role of providing Braille books for general reading. However, in the 1990s, the National Council for the Blind, Malaysia (NCBM) had also established its own Braille publishing service known as Malaysia Braille Press. Both organisations have been following developments in Braille usage, particularly with regard to changes being made in Britain.

The introduction of information technology, especially with regard to adaptive computer equipment and new methods of Braille production, brought many drastic changes in Braille production for the blind in this country. Unfortunately, all the efforts in keeping up to date with such changes had only occurred among the NGOs. They had been pro-active in introducing new measures, particularly with regard to Malay Braille production, by creating software such as the Malay Braille Translator and Duxbury for use with the computer. In fact, they had taken the initiative to import the new Braille printer known as the embosser, an adaptive computer device which has enabled Braille materials to be produced more speedily and in quantity.

In spite of this, computer Braille usage in Malaysia has not kept up with the times. In the Bahasa Melayu Braille code, for instance, the capital letter is only used for proper names. However, with computer production, the use of capital letters is in accordance with the usage in the print version. This change was not mentioned at all in the amended edition of the Bahasa Melayu Braille Code published in 2004.

The Braille Authority of THE United Kingdom (BAUK) in Britain is responsible for all matters pertaining to Braille usage, particularly with regard to the English Braille Code. This body has always been involved in monitoring and introducing changes to the English Braille Code whenever necessary. Besides Braille contractions, the body has also been looking at the need for new signs and symbols in Braille. Unfortunately, a similar body does not exist in Malaysia. Thus, there is the lack of an official authority to which reference could

be made to deal with and bring about necessary amendments and changes in the use of Braille not only for the Bahasa Melayu Braille Code but also for Mathematics, Science, Jawi and even English.

Thus, the time has now come for serious consideration to be made with regard to the establishment of such Braille Authority in Malaysia. This authority should include Braille experts both from the government agencies and the NGOs. Perhaps NCBM and the Special Education Division of the Ministry of Education could take the initiative in having such an authority established.

The objectives of this body should include:

1. Acting as the sole national reference body regarding Braille usage in this country.
2. Standardising the usage of Braille among the users of Braille both in the government agencies and in the NGOs.
3. Providing a platform for Braille experts and concerned individuals to gather for exchange of ideas regarding the usage of Braille in this country.
4. Representing Malaysia in conferences, workshops or seminars regarding Braille usage both on the national and international level.

Indeed, it is my earnest hope that such a national Braille authority will materialise one day. I believe this is crucial if the standard and quality of Braille is to be maintained for the benefit of the blind in this country especially in providing proper and better education for the blind.