THE BRAILLISTS FOUNDATION

USING BRAILLE FOR LEARNING LANGUAGES

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Welcome back. This is a recording of a fireside chat entitled Using Braille For Language Learning. The session took place on Tuesday, 17th November, 2020 and is introduced by Dave Williams.

Dave Williams: Good evening and a very warm welcome to the Braillists Foundation Tuesday evening master class. Tonight we've got a fascinating session all about how we can use Braille for language learning and our presenter this evening will be Holly Scott-Gardner.

Hello, Holly.

Holly Scott-Gardner: Hi, Dave.

Dave Williams: Hi. We'll come to you in a second. Just a reminder about some of the other things that are going on with the Braillists at the moment. On Thursday evenings at 6pm, we have our Braille book club so this is an opportunity to read along with other Braillists. It's really no pressure. You don't have to read aloud if you don't want to but it's a fun and safe and friendly environment where you can practice your Braille skills in the company of other Braille readers.

On Fridays we have our Stay Safe calls which are really just an open forum and an opportunity just to shoot the breeze, relax, wind down ready for the weekend so they're a very relaxed session on a Friday at 6 o'clock.

Next Monday will be our final Braille For Beginners session in the current series so there'll be a Braille quiz there and an opportunity for a very general Braille Q&A.

As always this session this evening is going to be run in line with our moderation policy. So, nothing too scary, all you need to remember is that we invite you to remain muted unless invited to do otherwise. This will help everybody clearly hear what's being said throughout the course of the event. It also helps particularly for those people dialling in on the phone. So when we get to questions, if you would like to make a comment or ask a question, you can do that by raising your hand to attract our host's attention. So that's Alt+Y on Windows, hold down the Alt key and press the letter Y, Option with Y on the Mac, star nine if you're dialling in on a conventional telephone or you can press the More button which is bottom right of your iOS app and then press the Raise Hand button from there and you'll be invited to unmute and if there are a few people in the queue then Ben, who is our host this evening, will let everybody know the order in which we will be coming to people.

Our presenter this evening has recently begun work with the Braillists to develop our training offer and our free courses. This is somebody that we've interviewed previously on the BrailleCast and a young lady who's travelled extensively in both North America and I believe South America, somebody with a passion for learning, passion for Braille, it gives me great pleasure to introduce Holly Scott-Gardner. Hi, Holly.

Holly Scott-Gardner: Hi. Thank you so much, Dave. That was a very nice introduction. I definitely appreciate that. As Dave said, I have begun some work with the Braillists, planning courses and webinars and various different things which you can find out about on our Events page on the website but I am someone who personally has a really strong interest in languages.

To tell you a bit about myself, to contextualise why I'm leading this session, I studied Spanish at university so I hold a Bachelor's degree in Spanish and I actually travelled to Spain before I went to university so that I could learn enough Spanish to be a successful student. While I was at university, I travelled to Colombia in South America and since leaving university I have started to learn Hebrew and French so I'm working on two languages, speak Spanish semi-fluently and a native English speaker. So I'm currently working at four languages in total. We'll see how many I make it to in, I don't know, 20 years time.

And that's really why I wanted to lead this session, because I'm so enthusiastic about languages and I really see how Braille has enhanced how I learn and has made me a more effective speaker of other languages.

When I went to university, at first I didn't use Braille. I had been a Braille user in English since I was two years old but I went to university and I thought I'd be just be fine with a computer, I didn't really need Braille for this, I was a great screen reader user. I was doing fine. I was doing okay. And then midway through my degree I decided to try Braille out in one of my classes and I halved the time it took me to complete translations and I had a very humbling moment in which I realised that whilst I'd thought I was pretty fantastic, I actually was just sort of surviving and using Braille was making me far more efficient and I needed to continue to use it. So I did since then.

So I really want to start by saying that if you do have questions or comments at any point throughout this, please raise your hand. Don't feel awkward about disrupting the session to ask a question. It's really important that everyone can do that. I also want to say I don't know everything. A lot of what I have learned is by trying new things and thinking, oh, I wonder if this would be a better way of approaching this topic or this area of language learning. There are areas where I am experimenting and trying new things so you might ask anything and I'll be like, I don't know, I'll go and find out for you. So that could also happen.

Let's start by looking at how Braille actually helps you to learn languages. So I think the first really major thing to be aware of is that using Braille as a language learning tool will improve your spelling. If you're using a screen reader, you can hear the words spoken, you can change the synthesizer to speak with the correct accent but what you can't do unless you navigate and go letter by letter, is really see the spelling of every single word and it becomes really tedious to constantly have to check, oh, what word is this, because these three words sound really similar but they're spelled slightly differently and they mean a different thing with each spelling. That is just an endless frustration.

So using Braille really solves that and the wonderful thing is you can use Braille in conjunction with speech if that's how you want to do things.

It also really helps with the understanding of sentence structure and grammar and this is something that I realised very quickly in translation. Actually I could break sentences down into their individual clauses. I could look at how they were constructed. When I did that in Braille, suddenly I was able to fit the pieces together. It's like something in my mind clicked and I was suddenly able to translate far more effectively than I ever had been before.

This really links in to the fact that you're able to read more accurately. So one thing you'll be doing when you're using a screen reader is maybe you're asked to read out loud and reading out loud with a screen reader is a skill you can develop but when you're reading in a language that you don't even know very well as it is, trying to listen and speak and keep listening, it can get quite complicated quite quickly. Using Braille actually results in a much more fluent and fluid experience.

These things will absolutely improve your writing. So whilst you can just learn to listen and speak a language, if you really want to know that language and get maximum use out of it, you need to be able to read and write and if you know Braille and have used Braille to learn all the spellings of everything that you need to actually learn that language properly, when you come to writing, your experience will be a whole lot better and you can choose to then write using a computer. Most of us will. We'll be sending emails and various different things and so we may write on a computer either using a Braille display or a QWERTY keyboard but having the knowledge of how the language is spelled will really help you when it comes to writing documents

One way in which I found that Braille could help me that just would not have worked with a screen reader was as a language learning tool for watching films.

So what a lot of sighted people do when they're learning a language is they will watch TV shows and films in the target language and while they're watching it, they will have the English subtitles up on the screen and this can really help you to actually learn a language a lot quicker because you're immersing yourself in the content but you also have that visual aid of subtitles.

Of course as someone like myself who's completely blind, you can't read those subtitles but with the iPhone now and actually being able to choose the subtitle output on the iPhone, you can choose that output in Braille and you could go onto something like Netflix, pair your Braille display with an iPhone. You can add to the rotor a media output with the subtitles as spoken or if they're shown in Braille and I always choose Braille output and then I can watch a film or a TV show and read the English subtitles as I go along.

In the beginning you're going to do a lot of stopping and starting because you just can't read quick enough to keep up with what's going on and that is exactly the same for a sighted person. When you're learning that language and you really want to absorb it, you're not going to be able to sit through two hours of a film and understand everything straight away. So what I do, is I tend to watch a couple of minutes, read as I go along and then if I get to a part where there's a lot of words I don't know, I might rewind and watch it again, read those subtitles. What that helps you do is you're listening to the language being spoken, but you have those subtitles in English so you can think, oh, I didn't know what that word meant and now I actually understand it within context as well. It's in many ways a lot easier than pausing and looking up a word in the dictionary which you can do if you want more in depth knowledge but if you really want to understand how it fits in the context of that film or what's being spoken, then actually have those subtitles in Braille in English is wonderful. I do that all the time now. Honestly, it's the way I used to really practice my Spanish now I've finished university.

Another tip is to set a language on your phone to the language that you're learning. So when I was learning Spanish, I went through a phase where I changed my phone to have Spanish output and so everything displayed on my phone screen was in Spanish and I set my VoiceOver to Spanish and I also set Braille output to Spanish and that really forced me to very quickly learn what was going. Again this is something that sighted people do when they're practicing a language, they may change the output on their phone and it's a way in which I found that actually as a blind person, you can do this just as well.

So, that is one way that really helped me because you have the assistance of VoiceOver. You can listen to the language being spoken but you can also read it. In some ways I think this gives us an advantage over sighted people because sighted people just have to read the words on the screen whereas we have VoiceOver actually speaking it which can sometimes help us quite a lot.

All of these things are designed to create a really Braille-rich environment and this is incredibly important when you're learning a language, is to create an environment in which that language is surrounding you in various different ways and it's in some ways harder to do that as a Braille user but now we have so much technology and we have access to refreshable Braille, it's much easier to build that Braille-rich environment for learning that language.

I just want to check quickly if you guys have any burning questions, just from what I've told you. I speak very quickly so I do tend to cover a lot in a very short space of time.

Ben Mustill-Rose: Yes, no problem. Thanks for that, Holly. That's really interesting. Great tip about subtitles as well. Combine learning a language with watching TV, what's there not to like.

We've got a question from Jess. Hey, Jess.

Jess: Hello. I have a couple of questions. You said you'd recently started learning French and Hebrew, I think, you said. Are there specific language programmes that you use to do that, that you could recommend? Also when you were saying about reading it in Braille, this might be a ridiculous question but obviously a lot of the letters are going to be the same as the English alphabet so would that be the same letters that you'd need to know in Braille for English? Do you need to be a fairly competent Braille reader to start off with in English before trying to go on to do it in a different language?

Holly Scott-Gardner: These are both really good questions. For French, in terms of language programme, I'm using a combination of different things. I'm watching a lot of online videos. I'm using just different websites to look up, for example, words in the dictionary. I've also used the Duolingo app which has its faults from a technical language learning perspective, in that you're doing a lot of translating but what I think it does, if you're willing to look up the grammar yourself as well, it is a very accessible app so I would recommend that.

Jess: Yes, I use Duolingo myself and didn't know if there were other similar ones. I quite like it. I'm doing Spanish on it. I also have a Spanish degree but from a long time ago and it's very lapsed so this is trying to refresh it a bit. It seems quite American, doesn't it? So there's things that I would have thought of in Spanish, that I'm like, "Yes, I know that's right," and it will tell me I'm wrong all the time. So I get a bit frustrated with it. The app in itself is accessible for VoiceOver and it's got different grammar things you can look up.

Holly Scott-Gardner: Yes, it is really accessible and honestly what I'd recommend if you're coming back to a language, is to look online for, say, penpals. You can even post on social media and things and find blind penpals. I find that quite useful because it's cool to meet blind people in other countries and that's quite often what I'll do, is post on for example a blindness Facebook group. There are Facebook groups, for example, for blind people in Latin America so I might look up that group and then write, "Oh, I speak some Spanish, I really would like a penpal." I find that if you're coming back to a language, that's a really nice way of doing it and then you can just chat through email and it's one thing I'm doing. I've connected with a Spanish speaking penpal because I don't want to forget all my Spanish.

Jess: Yes, that's a great idea. I wish I'd done that ten years ago. But hindsight's a great thing. Also I had my vision back then so it's now coming at it from a blindness perspective is all a bit different.

Holly Scott-Gardner: Yes. In terms of your question about Braille, so what I would recommend is, if you know some English Braille, just start with Grade 1 of the language that you're learning. There'll be some differences. The alphabet will be broadly the same. You'll have to learn the accented letters. The one wonderful thing about Spanish is it's very easy because you learn a handful of accented letters and that's the only thing you really need to learn. So once you learn those few others, and you can really contextualise them just by reading because you'll see a letter that you don't know and then you'll think, "Hm, okay, I know this word. Oh, it has to be an o acute," and then you know, okay, that's the symbol for that. That's what I did with Spanish actually. I was never taught Spanish Braille. I just ended up figuring it out.

I wouldn't recommend for something like French going onto Grade 2 because it's just too much. I wouldn't unless I really wanted to get serious. I think reading in Grade 1 for another language is fine, at least initially, until you actually decide you really want to pursue the language.

Jess: Brilliant, thank you.

Ben Mursill-Rose: Thanks for that, Jess. Great questions to get us started. We don't have any other hands raised at the moment but as you say, plenty more opportunities. Oh, and just as I say that, we have a question from Sheila.

Sheila: Hello. I joined ever so slightly late so it's not a question really. It's just a bit of my history. I made friends 20 odd years ago with a German girl who was over here as a student and for me, she started to learn Braille, although she's sighted. I thought, well, if she's going to learn Braille for me, I'd better start learning German for her, because we were never taught languages at school. My husband and I, we did about three years at an evening class for sighted people and they were working from a book. I decided to get the book in Braille and some prison actually transcribed the work book into Braille for me, which was great. When it came, I was really excited until I started to read it and then I was thinking, "What?" The German words, they weren't in complete contracted German Braille. I really don't think they could be because I could recognise some of the letters. Like we have in ours, in Grade 2, it had all those. So I wasn't just learning the language, I was actually having to learn the Braille as well. But I really got into it and I started to remember things like our "wh" is their "sch". I learned the umlauts and I really got into it. It was purely for a hobby but I haven't seen my friend for quite a few years, although we're still in touch, and I find that I've forgotten more than I think I learned in the first place, which is a real shame, because I love language and dialect and accents, all the different things, I'm fascinated with it and it's a shame. That was a good idea that you mentioned to Jess but I thought, well, I'm not a lover of Facebook, I don't get on with it very well but I could always go to my friend. At the end of the day, I think, yes, but if I learn all that I learned before and more, I'm going to lose it again because I don't use it. So I feel a bit defeatist.

The other thing that I wanted to say was, when you first started, you said that speech, when you started using Braille more regularly, you found that it helped your spelling. Now, I used to be able to see and when I was at school, spelling was one of my best subjects but then when I started to lose my sight and I was relying on audio and Braille, because of the contractions in Braille, now I find my spelling is not as good as it used because I'm so used to seeing the abbreviations and contractions in English Braille, that I seem to have lost the art of how to spell things. So I've sort of gone completely opposite to how you feel about it.

Holly Scott-Gardner: Yes, I think that's the thing with Braille and with just people. It's very individual and using Braille really helped me because I could suddenly see how the words were spelled, whereas for some people it is confusing and I think certainly with a language, if you learn some of the Grade 1, that can really help with the spelling because you're just reading the words as they would be written, without any contractions.

I know what you mean about practicing as well. It's the hardest thing, if there isn't really a purpose, if you're not doing it for a job or something, you've just got to find people to chat to and it can be quite difficult to maintain that.

Sheila: Yes, it is. Once I started having a conversation with people, I loved it, I really loved it. So that's just my two pennyworth anyway.

Holly Scott-Gardner: I love hearing these stories. It's actually really great to hear how people are learning languages and people who have learned languages.

Sheila: I must admit, at the time, when we were going to the class and there were all these sighted people who had it all written down in English and of course in German as well, but I thought, "Sheila, you can't be that bad," because I'm having to learn two languages at once. I'm having to learn German and parts of German Braille as well. So it gave me a real confidence lift.

Holly Scott-Gardner: Yes, and I think that's a lovely thing about languages is that it can improve your confidence and it's such a social thing so you're seeing how you can learn something but you're also building something that really helps you connect to other people. It doesn't matter that you're blind in that situation, everyone is excited when they find out that someone speaks their language.

Sheila: They are.

Ben Mursill-Rose: Thanks for that, Sheila. Quite a few hands raised now so we're going to go to Paul, Paul Sullivan first and then after Paul, we're going to come to Laurent.

Paul: Thank you, hello. Holly, I'm a lifelong Braille reader. I learned it when I was seven, I think, many, many years ago, I'm 63 now. So I've been dabbling with Spanish, also, for a long time although I wouldn't say I'm very good but I really enjoy it. I always say I enjoy learning Spanish in the same way that other people are doing Sudoku or the crossword. I just find it so satisfying and intellectually pleasing.

To come to my question, it's really about paper Braille resources. I don't want to jump ahead if you're going to mention it already but I'm interested to know what the RNIB might hold in terms of library now with Spanish material or where or if other paper Braille resources exist. I use a phone with a 14 cell Braille display to access a dictionary online and things like that but I really enjoy paper Braille as well.

Holly Scott-Gardner: Yes, so paper Braille is an interesting one. As far as I know, the RNIB does hold some foreign-

Ben Mursill-Rose: Holly, just to interrupt you, you're quite quiet at the moment and we're not hearing much from you. We'll do our best to get Holly back.

Holly Scott-Gardner: I can hear you. Can you hear me?

Dave Williams: Holly, you're still really quiet. You might need to replug your headset. I see James Bowden's got his hand raised and he might want to respond.

Ben Mursill-Rose: Up to you what we do, Dave, but one of the things that we usually plug on these calls is our equipment offering. Do you want to give us a brief overview of what equipment we are able to donate and what you might use it for and how you can get it, Dave, and then shall we try Holly again afterwards?

Dave Williams: Well, I think James might be able to answer the question about paper Braille so let's try James.

James Bowden: Thank you. It's a very interesting one, Paul, and the short answer is not much because our library at the RNIB is a predominantly English library for English users and the books are written in English. However the longer answer is, as you may know, the Marrakesh Treaty has been signed in the UK, it's ratified now so looking forward, I'm hoping there's going to be a lot more book sharing between countries.

Holly Scott-Gardner: Can I just check if you guys can hear me better now?

Dave Williams: Yes, you're good, excellent.

Holly Scott-Gardner: Oh, I hate technology.

James Bowden: I was also going to make another interesting point, coming back to what Sheila was talking about, the German Braille. Now, German is interesting in so far as it doesn't just have Grade 1 and Grade 2. It also has, if you like, a Grade 1.5 and that's effectively what I think, Sheila, you were probably reading. So the Grade 1 is no contractions at all but I don't think it's really that much used. Then you've got your Grade 1.5, which has a few contractions for the common letter groups. And then you have your full Kurzschrift or Grade 2 which is incredibly interesting stuff. Just like your French abrégé, it's full of interesting weird signs.

Holly Scott-Gardner: Yes, German Grade 2 is very difficult and I think it was 1.5 as well because that was the same as what I would have used at Worcester and it sounds from what Sheila described very similar and that was the standard transcription for German Braille in the UK as well so that would make sense.

In terms of how I copy resources, you can reach out to la ONCE in Spain and they are the Spanish Organisation for the Blind. Now, I don't know whether they will give you any of their resources because you're not based in Spain but James is right that the Marrakesh Treaty will hopefully really, really help with this because we can then exchange more Braille resources. So right now in some ways your best bet is to try to find someone who has an embosser and send them over some ebooks and they may be able to run you some not wonderful copies but decent copies and that is how I've done things before.

Dave Williams: If you have a specific title in mind that you'd like to see available perhaps in the RNIB, it's worth contacting RNIB and making sure they're aware of your request, which you might have already done.

Paul: Thanks for those helpful comments. I just wonder though, the RNIB used to have massive student library collections. I've seen stuff in other languages years ago in the old student library collections. Were they lost or have they gone somewhere else? Also I've got several books that I acquired via the Recycle IT list, the email group for blind people buying and selling stuff. A few y ears ago somebody unloaded a 33 volume Collins dictionary and about 20 other volumes of Braille onto me which I'm eternally grateful for because I'm not terribly proactive. I wouldn't have gone looking for them at the time but they came along at a time when I was dabbling with Spanish again and they've really fuelled my interest and kept me going and now I'm doing an adult education course.

But it's the perennial problem with adult education courses is getting the books in the accessible formats and generally just the lack of awareness in the classes.

So any ideas about the old student library stock?

Holly Scott-Gardner: So, Dave is probably a better person to answer or James. I do know that RNIB has Bookshare which is their educational library. Now, I don't think you have to be a child because I think universities can access it but you have to be at some educational environment but if you're taking an adult education course, if it's through a college or something, I'm not speaking as anything official to do with the RNIB, just a student, but can you access it through that? I would think James or Dave would know.

Dave Williams: So James has raised his hand.

James Bowden: I don't know the answer but what I would suggest you do is email bookshare@rnib.org.uk.

Paul: I'll do that. That's a good suggestion. I had assumed that I wasn't eligible for Bookshare because I've always thought it was undergraduate level or school or such like but it may apply to people like me that are doing local council adult education.

James Bowden: Yes, it's always worth a try.

Dave Williams: We might be able to join Bookshare as the Braillists organisation, now that we're actually an organisation, so I will look into that.

Holly Scott-Gardner: That would be wonderful and to help people get those resources because I agree with you, it's hard when you want to learn but you're not a child in school and you really want to make sure you have access. Because there is the Bookshare library for education, it would be great if you could have access to that.

Dave Williams: Let us know how you get on with ONCE in Spain because if they, again, don't want to deal with an individual, maybe they'd be willing to deal with an organisation so that might be something we could also do.

Holly Scott-Gardner: I can practice my Spanish trying to set something up.

Ben Mursill-Rose: We're going to go to Laurent now. Then after Laurent, we're going to go to Rita.

Laurent: Hey, guys. Thanks for putting on today's event. I think this is really close to my heart. I've always been a big language fan. I thought I'd just quickly start off by sharing a few of the resources that I've really found useful. So for French, similar to our RNIB reading services, they've got the [UNSURE OF NAME]. They had no problems signing me up as somebody from the UK. You might need to get in there very quickly, I don't know, but from there, I can access their online library with BRF files and DAISY audio. There is a similar service that I belong to, a German one called "dzb lesen" and that's also Braille and audio and they had no problem with me writing to them in broken German saying, "I'm from England, I know a little bit of German, could I please join your library?" And they said no problem.

I'm not sure whether these guys can provide paper Braille but they can certainly provide a huge catalogue of very current electronic Braille stuff and certainly with the French one, you can also select what kind of Grade of Braille you want the files in.

There's also the option of joining the US version of Bookshare and they've got some Spanish stuff on there and you can either pay for it or if you want it for free, you need to make sure that you're enrolled with a school in the US so there's the Hadley School for the Blind who are always happy to take on international students and sign up for a course with them and that will then give you your US Bookshare for free.

Holly Scott-Gardner: That's wonderful.

Laurent: Yes. I must take full credit for discovering that loophole.

Holly Scott-Gardner: You're absolutely right about Hadley and it is free to take courses and you've just reminded me, they have actually a Spanish discussion group as well which you can join, which is quite nice, where they meet on, I don't know if it's Zoom, and they just chat in Spanish which is quite a nice thing.

Laurent: Yes, I think I'll need to check that out. The other thing I wanted to mention was how amazing it is nowadays, even in terms of accessing languages that don't use the Roman alphabet. I think that's really, really amazing. When I was about 12, I had Greek friends and I went to Greek school with them on a Saturday and I wanted to learn Greek, why not? So what I had to do was basically I had to sit with the teacher and she had to tell me all the words and I had to write them down on my Perkins in phonetic letters, my own version of what I thought would roughly correspond to the sounds and the letters. I managed to get a smattering of Greek but nowadays I've got a BrailleNote Touch Plus and that thing has I don't know how many hundreds of Braille tables and you can download [INAUDIBLE] for it and you can pretty much set up a profile to do whatever you want. My experience learning Greek now would have been so much different.

Like you, I've also started dabbling with Hebrew a little bit. I thought for me that would be quite close to my heart, being able to read the Old Testament in its source language. So for me that's a bit of a project and I'm just really flabbergasted by how relatively easy it's become, from the times when I was a child, trying to learn Greek.

Holly Scott-Gardner: Yes, I think technology has given us really wonderful access and also people who are working within the Braille field, making sure that these language codes are kept up to date and that there are tables for them. We owe a lot to everyone who's doing that work because we just wouldn't be able to access those things otherwise. It has made a huge difference to me too so I'm glad that it's been helpful for you. And thank you for the advice about those libraries because I think that will really, really help people.

Laurent: Yes. My guess is that there are probably quite a few more out there which I don't know about, for all kinds of European languages at least and who knows what else.

Holly Scott-Gardner: Yes, I think so. All you can do is email people and hope that they will email you back, is really all you can do, you've just got to go with it.

Laurent: Yes, and I think especially if it's electronic resources. The gatekeepers are probably a bit more chilled about that, about letting people in.

Holly Scott-Gardner: Yes, definitely.

It's interesting that you mentioned about languages that do not use the Roman alphabet because that's actually what I was going to come onto next. I don't know if we have any more hands raised.

Ben Mursill-Rose: We've got a few. Thanks for that, Laurent. We're going to come to Rita now and after Rita, we have Thomas.

So just ask you to unmute, Rita.

Rita: I'm here, yes. Hi. I learned French a long, long time ago and was able to read it quite well in print but now that I've lost my sight and learned Braille, I'd really like to be able to learn the French Braille code. I've been able to read a little bit of Grade 1 in museums and things but I don't really know the accents signs and I would really like to learn Grade 2. How would I go about that?

Holly Scott-Gardner: So what I would recommend would be to contact a Braille authority in France. So there is a book which I was going to talk about at the end but I'll talk about it now because this is a good thing to talk about. There's a book called World Braille Usage and you can either buy it from the RNIB for about £9 or download the BRF online for free. So whichever you prefer, whether you want hard copy or electronic. What that does is that gives you an overview of all these Braille language codes from across the world and information about the relevant Braille authority in the country. You don't have to get that book to find out about France. You can research the French Braille authority and I would ask them for some information on the code. That's how I would personally go about it. Or I would find a French speaker, so someone, preferably a French person, who also speaks English who's a blind person, by posting maybe on various talking newspapers or on online groups and things or asking blind people because whilst we all hate to admit it, in one way or another, every blind person ends up knowing each other so you'll be able to find someone through the community. I would maybe even do that, is actually find a blind person in France who would love to maybe learn some English and chat to you and you can learn the French Braille code through them and then maybe share some information about English with them. That's one way I found that works well.

Rita: Yes, that's a good idea. I don't really at the moment do social media terribly much. That would be my problem there. I've had a sighted pen friend for more than 40 years but obviously that's no good for the Braille.

Holly Scott-Gardner: I don't know if you do emails. You could join the Braillists forum if you do and maybe post a message there because what people could do is forward it to a friend, if they have a friend in France, to say, "Oh, there's someone from England looking for a blind French pen pal," something like that. Or you could ask one of us and we can do some outreach and find you someone as well. I'd be happy to search around. I'm sure I know people who would do that.

Rita: Okay, lovely. Thank you. Yes, I do email.

Ben Mursill-Rose: So, Holly, I'm not sure what you want to do. We've got about 15 minutes left. We have Jess and Sheila who have both got their hands raised so I don't know if we want to come to them now or maybe leave it for a little bit and see if we have time at the end. Up to you.

Holly Scott-Gardner: So I have quite a lot left to cover so I will try and zoom through that and then get to some more hands if that's okay.

Ben Mursill-Rose: Sounds good to me.

Holly Scott-Gardner: So, the next thing I was going to come onto was languages which do not use the Latin or Roman alphabet and these are really difficult to learn without the use of Braille, I think, because whilst you can maybe learn some of the spoken language, what you'll really struggle to do is actually read and write anything. You can't just go on your computer and start typing in the language, unlike with something like Spanish where you can guess, "Oh, well, that sounds like a T and that's a B, okay." But if you're learning a language like Hebrew, you need to learn the Hebrew alphabet.

So one way in which I found just completely essential is to use BRF, so electronic Braille files. So if you can get your books and training resources transcribed as BRF files, these are really helpful, particularly for languages like Hebrew. Finding a transcriber can be hard but there are transcribers out there that specialise in biblical languages. I learn Hebrew from a blind person living in the United States who works as a lecturer at a university over there. She's almost completely blind and she is a transcriber and she speaks Hebrew and Greek and she teaches people. So I was very fortunate to find her and she has produced all these Hebrew files for me and teaches me as one of her blind students.

So finding those kinds of people is incredibly useful and getting access to BRF files, because what you're not having to worry about is any kind of forward or back translation on your Braille device. It will just read as it should.

I will upload some text-based notes along with this recording on the Braillists website, including various different websites where you can find these kinds of people.

The hardest thing really, and it doesn't matter what language you're learning, is remembering new Braille symbols such as accented letters and punctuation. The best advice I can give you for that is to read as much as you can and to read out loud. So, if you read in your head, it's very, very easy just to skip over a word that you don't really know and you're like, "Well, it's fine, I'll come back to it later." If you're reading out loud, you can often actually figure out what that word should be as you're hearing yourself speak the language out loud and you'll be like, "Oh, I know what that word must be now in this context." So that's something that's really helped me.

Another app that I find very useful is Voice Dream Reader. So what you could do is load an ebook in whatever language you're learning into Voice Dream Reader. Let's say you find a Spanish book on the Internet, so you load it into Voice Dream Reader and you can get a synthesizer for the language and so Voice Dream Reader can be reading the book out loud but you can also be following that ebook in Braille as well. So you'll set the TTS, text-to-speech, to a really slow rate that you wouldn't normally use but you'll practice reading the Braille along with the speech and I find that incredibly helpful.

Another thing which I've sort of touched on in answer to some of these questions as well is to find blind people in other countries to whom you can write. So maybe they want to improve their English or maybe they just want to know about life for blind people in England and they already speak good English or they just want to talk to you about music or something. So you say, "Well, I'll talk to you about all these things but can you teach me some of your language along the way, or can I send a couple of emails to you in Spanish and then you send a few back and then we'll exchange some in English?" Make sure you're reading and writing those emails as well. If you have a Braille display, then use that Braille display to help you with that.

Another great language learning tool, and this is completely low-tech, is making flashcards. So sighted people use flashcards all the time and I find that as a blind person, I don't use them in quite the same way. So I'm not highlighting them and I'm not colour-coordinating them and all these kinds of things. I might be reading my huge Hebrew grammar book and I come across a new word. One of the first words I learned in Hebrew was the various different ways in which God is described in the bible because I'm learning biblical Hebrew so God is pretty central to this.

So what I would do is, I would think, "Okay, I know the word now, " so I'd write it down on a note card and then I'd write the English as well. What that meant is that when I came to doing some translations, I didn't have to suddenly think, "Oh, no, I know that word was mentioned somewhere about 15 pages ago and now I've got to try and find it and even if I do a search for it, I may not find it in the right place," so by making this dictionary, almost, your own personal dictionary as you go along, that is something that I find very useful and even if you're using an app like Duolingo and learning, for example, French, you can still do that.

I like to use note cards for this. You can use sheets of paper if you want. I personally think the advantage with note cards is they're quite small so I buy ones that are, say, postcard sized. You can use a slate and stylus, so a Braille writing frame, to write this, which also helps you practice your slating which is something I like to do. You can write the words and the English definition and then file them in a ring binder and what that means is you can move those cards around. So, you can either arrange your binder in alphabetical order, much like a traditional dictionary, or you can group by, for example, putting all the nouns together; all the verbs together; anything that prefixes a word in this language, put those together. You can order that dictionary in whatever way you want. You can literally do it in the order in which you learned the words, if you think that would be helpful.

It's up to you but what you're doing then is building a resource which you can refer to quite quickly and it's not hugely heavy to carry around. It's a ring binder. It's not that bad.

Actually, one other thing that I've done with note cards is incorporated that with audio notes. So I might use something like the RNIB PenFriend which I happen to have anyway and I might stick a PenFriend label on a particularly interesting card where, say, there's a word that has multiple different meanings depending on the context. What I might do is then record some audio notes onto that label so that then when I come to that word, I can also listen to my notes back again and I find that quite helpful. For example if there's a word that I always get wrong or I always maybe conjugate a particular very quite badly, I might record myself some notes to remind myself not to do that this time around. So I find it quite helpful, having the mixture of Braille and audio notes so that I can record my long rambling thoughts in audio and listen to them or not, as the case may be but I have the very brief Braille note which is just the word and then the word in English as well.

Another way of doing this is to actually use UEB and, okay, you wouldn't really do that for something like Hebrew but for a language like Spanish where you're dealing with just some accents, you could in theory read Spanish using UEB because UEB has provision for accented letters. Now, I don't think this is ideal because if you want to get books from another country and use their library, you're going to need to learn the Braille code but if for example you are just quickly writing in Braille screen input on your phone and you don't want to bother changing to Spanish, just learn the accent symbols in UEB and then off you go, you can write in that language and also read back to yourself quite quickly.

You can look on the UKAAF website for all the various different guidelines about UEB and the RNIB has lots of information too so if you want any of that info, it's all publicly available online.

I really zoomed through all of that but that is the main points. What I would say is if anyone has a particular interest in Hebrew, the Jewish Braille Institute in America will send you hard copy Hebrew resources. Now they do have the full Hebrew bible available as BRF files. I also have it and I'm happy to share it with anyone. If you want a hard copy Hebrew bible, they will send you one. They do have donated copies so it may be a used copy that was really cherished by someone else and now it's being passed on to you so if you really think you'll use it, then absolutely, they don't mind what country you're in. Their focus is ensuring that blind people who want to learn Hebrew and who really want access to biblical Hebrew have access to it. So they're a really nice resource as well.

Ben Mursill-Rose: So we have one hand raised at the moment from Steve. So I'll just bring you in now, Steve. Hands keep on coming, so we're going to go to Steve and then we're going to go to Thomas. So, hey, Steve, you're good to go.

Steve: Hiya. Thanks very much for the session. It's been great. One thing I was going to mention, about the biblical Hebrew, and Greek for that matter, there is a site which does a lot of BRF files, some learning resources too, and it's called [UNSURE OF SPELLING]. They've got a few Tanakh there for the Hebrew. I did try to learn the Hebrew off of there but found it very difficult. I'm now trying to go onto an eTeacher thing. It's interesting but quite a bit challenging. It's great to hear about some of these other resources you've found too, particularly with regards to the Hebrew, that was good to hear. Thank you for that.

Holly Scott-Gardner: Yes, no worries, and I'd be more than happy to link you up with my Hebrew teacher as well if you're interested, because they are a blind person. They teach Hebrew to sighted people too but obviously as a blind person, they're wonderful at teaching blind people

Steve: That would be really good. They do five different courses, five different levels on the eTeacher and they've let me have the slides beforehand but they're in Powerpoint so I have to convert them and then convert them again and then take them out of html and put them into Word so I can scribble notes on them and it's a bit tricky and some of the stuff is in the picture so it gets lost as well. If I could get in contact with your friend too, that would be really good.

Holly Scott-Gardner: Yes, so if you drop an email to the Braillists help address, help@braillists.org, then I can get that forwarded on to me and I'll send you a message and connect you with our group because we have a study group that meets every week and there's three blind students currently, me, an American and someone from Jordan, so we all meet. It's very international. It's wonderful actually, I love it.

Steve: Sounds it. So it's help@braillists.org?

Holly Scott-Gardner: Yes.

Steve: Excellent. Many thanks, Holly.

Ben Mursill-Rose: Thanks for that suggestion there, Steve. Going to come to Thomas now and after that we're going to go back to Jess. Hey, Thomas.

Thomas: Hello. Good evening from Germany. Hi, Holly. Nice to meet you and to hear you and to hear about your experience in learning languages. It has been very interesting to me. What I was wondering, when speaking of languages with a non-Roman alphabet, have you ever looked into the Asian languages like Chinese, Vietnamese and so on because there would be really hundreds if not thousands of signs, letters and things? Would there be a Braille translation for it or a Braille code for it?

Holly Scott-Gardner: Yes, there is. I don't know it because I don't speak any of those languages though possibly one day. We'll see how my learning goes. But they do exist, so, for example, you can read Mandarin in Braille, you can read Japanese in Braille. I presume various other Asian languages. Those codes have been developed and I would say they're available online. It's about finding people, is the hardest thing. Again I would make that suggestion of trying to find someone else who knows it. So for Chinese, I would probably look to maybe connect with some Asian-Americans who are blind to maybe speak to them and see if they know the language, particularly people who have come to the US and maybe were educated in China because there's likely to be less of a language barrier because they'll speak English but also not so many issues with communicating over the Internet to China, which can obviously be complicated sometimes.

Thomas: Okay, thank you.

Ben Mursill-Rose: Thanks for that, Thomas. Last few minutes now, we're going to come to Jess next and then we're going to go back to Laurent.

Jess: Hello. You partly answered my question already when you were talking about the flashcards that you use to kind of make your own dictionary but I was curious about using dictionaries. Obviously when I was learning previously, I was able to see the print in the dictionary and use it that way, but using dictionaries without sight just seems a little bit mind-boggling to me. Do you do that in Braille or is that mainly audio that you would look up words? Are there any particularly good apps with dictionaries that you would recommend?

Holly Scott-Gardner: I would do it online and have a Braille display connected to my phone or my computer so that I have Braille output but I'm not using hard copy. A hard copy Braille dictionary is just volume upon volume and it's a nice thing to have if you can get hold of one but you can't carry it around and what I've always found is the Collins online dictionary, it's a well-respected dictionary anyway so that's also what you want, is to ensure that it's a good one. So I would go with Collins because you'll find students using the hard copy Collins one but they have a good website. Once you get used to it, it's one of those things that at first there seems to be a lot but actually once you get used to it, it is completely accessible. It will just take a bit of time learning your way round it. That's what I used when I was at university.

Jess: Okay, and it's just through their website?

Holly Scott-Gardner: Yes. I haven't checked if they have an app actually. When I had exams where you could use a dictionary, I obviously could do it on my computer but only with the browser and having someone looking over my shoulder so that's how I had to do it at uni.

Jess: Okay. It's really interesting and your whole presentation has been so fascinating and really quite inspirational to get learning again so thank you.

Holly Scott-Gardner: I'm so glad it's been helpful.

Jess: Oh, it's been brilliant. I wish you'd been around 15 years ago.

Holly Scott-Gardner: Thank you.

Ben Mursill-Rose: Great to hear that, Jess. Going to come to Laurent and then very quickly after you, Laurent, we're going to come back to Sheila. Hey, Laurent.

Laurent: Hey. So I just wanted to echo what Steve said about learning Hebrew from [UNSURE OF SPELLING] so that's where I also have tried learning from but it is pretty dense and pretty hard to digest so I'll be getting in touch with you.

I think the [UNSURE OF SPELLING] resources have had a lot of effort put in them but it's a very dense experience, trying to get into it. But one fact is that I found that the Hebrew Braille alphabet, as well as the Arabic one, it's nearly as though the letter sounds relate a little bit to what they would be in the Roman alphabet. Not completely but to the point where I've got a Muslim friend and I can have a look at her Braille Koran and kind of read it. I have no clue what I was saying but I was able to kind of make the right sounds, which I thought was pretty cool and I'm not sure if a sighted person could have done that.

Holly Scott-Gardner: Yes, it is actually true. Although I don't know about Arabic, but for Hebrew, it's because, Hebrew was a language that was really only biblical until back in, I would say, 19th or 20th century when really it had a revival to be spoken and is of course now spoken in Israel and actually it was American-Jewish people that created Hebrew Braille in the 1920s and 30s so that is why it's so closely related to the English alphabet. Actually as blind people we get a much better deal than sighted people learning Hebrew.

Laurent: Yes, and I think the same goes for Arabic.

What I also wanted to say, Thomas, I've had a bit of a go at learning Mandarin and my reflections on that are that even if we were able to learn the Braille codes for Mandarin, I think that a lot of the poetry of the language would be lost on the Braille reader because I think that the people who learn Mandarin are sighted people, getting really involved in all the ideograms and the way that they look and it's really there's so much meaning in the ideograms and the way that they are presented, the way that they have subtle nuances of meaning and differences in their appearance, I think that we might need to work very hard to get the same kind of experience, not necessarily in being able to acquire a functional spoken knowledge of the language, but in terms of maybe appreciating the poetry or the in jokes. That's my guess. Not saying that it's not worth doing but I think that it would be quite a lifelong study to do that.

Holly Scott-Gardner: Well, thank you. I haven't actually tried Mandarin so that's a good thing to know. I suspect you're right. I know it's different how they've had to make almost a really different structure for it to translate it across to Braille. It's one of those things like you say, a lifelong study really.

Laurent: Yes. There's an easy kind of shortcut, in terms of using a system called Pinyin where you have the sounds and then a number representing the tone of the sounds and that's dead easy to do in Braille.

Holly Scott-Gardner: Great, that's good to know.

Laurent: If it came to be the actual characters, then I think it would be a whole different story.

Holly Scott-Gardner: Yes. Well, thank you. That's really good to know.

Ben Mursill-Rose: Do we have time to go to Sheila quickly, Holly?

Holly Scott-Gardner: It's up to you, Ben.

Ben Mursill-Rose: Let's go to- last but by no means least, we have Sheila.

Sheila: Hello. Just a quick one. I don't have Braille displays so I'm presuming that your BRF are files that come on your Braille display?

Holly Scott-Gardner: Yes, so they're electronic Braille files that you'd read on an Orbit or another display.

Sheila: Right. The other thing, I missed what you said that you can get from the RNIB for £9, the Braille in other languages book and I also didn't hear all of what Laurent said about the German. I heard the "lesen" at the end but I didn't hear what he said before that. Was it day to day reading or something?

Holly Scott-Gardner: World Braille Usage is a book which you can get from the RNIB and it really gives a very brief overview of different Braille codes used across the world. It's been described as the Braille bible so it's not in depth, you wouldn't use it to study a language but what it will do is it will nudge you along the way when you're really beginning. I am waiting eagerly for my copy because it has lots of exciting obscure languages in it.

The library, I cannot remember off the top of the my head the name of it, but what I will do is I will put it in the document that will go on the website. I don't know if that's helpful for you but it will be in a Word document.

Sheila: Yes. I just didn't quite hear what Laurent said. That's smashing, thank you very much.

Holly Scott-Gardner: Wonderful. Great.

Ben Mursill-Rose: Thanks for that, Sheila.

Holly Scott-Gardner: Thank you, everyone, so much for coming. It's been really great. I love connecting with other people who love languages. For people who do social media type stuff, there is a discord server for Braille language or blind language learners using Braille or not which people are welcome to connect with me and join that and meet some other people who are learning languages who also happen to be blind. It's just so great to share all this information and I hope that we can connect again, especially for those of you who are interested in Hebrew.

Dave Williams: Can we just check in with Thomas very quickly? It might have been in response to the question about German maybe.

Thomas: Yes, exactly, it was about what Laurent said and Sheila didn't understand. What he meant was dzb which is D-Z-B which is the Deutsche Zentralbücherei, the German Central Library for the blind in Leipzig and he referred to this library where he also had access to some resources.

Holly Scott-Gardner: Perfect. Thank you so much. I'll make sure that goes in the document that gets circulated as well.

Dave Williams: Thanks so much, Holly. If you missed anything, a recording of today's session along with accompanying notes will be available in a few days from braillists.org/media and the audio will also be made available via the BrailleCast podcast which you can find in the usual places that you get your podcasts.

Braille music is our topic next Tuesday. James Bowden will be back and James is going to be teaching us the rudiments of Braille music and taking your questions as well so if you've ever had any interest in how you might go about using music and Braille together to complement one another, then we will be exploring that at the same time next week.

Don't forget to sign up for the Braillists newsletter, our book club on Thursday, our Stay Safe call on Friday and of course we have our Braille forum as well where you can connect and email with other Braillists as well.

So thank you very much, Holly, for a fascinating session and lots of great questions there. I'm sure it's a session we could probably do over and over because it's almost an endless subject and all being well, COVID19 notwithstanding, I'm hopefully going to visit Nepal next year and I was wondering how I might use Braille to learn a bit of Nepalese so there we are.

Holly Scott-Gardner: Good luck.

Dave Williams: Maybe we'll save that for another day.

Alright, thanks a lot, everybody. Stay safe, stay in touch and we'll speak with you soon. Bye for now.

Holly Scott-Gardner: Bye, bye.