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Why Universal Literacy matters for Children and Young Adults with Specific Needs?

Hiroshi Kawamura

Vice President, Assistive Technology Development Organization (ATDO), Chofu-shi, Japan
hkawa@atdo.jp



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Abstract:

All United Nations member states approved 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development which includes SDGs. "Libraries" are not mentioned in this strategic document. However, "a world with universal literacy" is mentioned in "Our vision" of the Agenda as one of overarching goals of SDGs. The 2030 Agenda also stresses "leaving no one behind".

IFLA declares its support and contributions to the Agenda representing global library communities. The author discusses innovation, new findings, and unmet needs around library services for children and young adults with specific needs in addition to good practices.

International instruments such as 2030 Agenda, Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and WIPO Marrakesh Treaty as well as international accessibility standards will be discussed as tools to achieve the cross-border goals.

Harmonization of "adaptation to meet a specific need" and "universal design development to reduce adaptation as much as possible" will be stressed to make the "universal literacy" real. In this context, linking needs of individuals and international standards development will be discussed.

Case study on the Accessible Book Consortium as one of the most promising cross-border exchange mechanisms of accessible alternative publication in accessible and easy to understand format will be discussed in relation to the Marrakesh Treaty.

Emerging issues of media accessibility will be a cross-cutting issue and opportunity to meet the needs of children and young adults with visual and/or auditory, cognitive, intellectual, or mental disabilities.

Multilingual services issues and opportunities will be discussed too.

Keywords: SDGs, synchronized accessible multimedia, literacy, WIPO Marrakesh Treaty

Introduction

I have a good friend whose first language is a sign language because her parents are deaf. She learned spoken and written English as her second language. One day when we shared a lunch in a restaurant, she asked me to read the menu aloud. I was a bit surprised because I thought she is a sighted native English and the vocabularies in the menu were so difficult to pronounce for me. I thought it was a joke but she explained her difficulty in reading a menu even written in English. It is difficult for her to move her eyes to follow a text line horizontally in particular the menu like texts. According to her, her eyes are scanning very quickly all around the page and it takes longer time to understand the price of each item in the menu.

I suddenly reminded this story a few months ago in Tokyo when I met 9 years old girl with near vision problems. She is not a legally blind according to Japanese legislation which is defined by far-vision. The vision screening in Japanese schools is always measured by far-vision. A large number of children with near vision problems are not properly supported as long as they have certain level of far-vision. Near vision is the vision to see objects at 30 cm. Far-vision is ability to see 5 or 3 meters distance. Children who can see the blackboard in the class room may have difficulties to read textbooks or tablet in 30 cm distance. Among senior citizens, this is very common. I have a good distance vision but I cannot read a regular font size book without a glass. However, near vision problem among children prevents development of brain function to recognize characters and texts which may result in serious reading problems. It is believed that rapid development of brain function development to recognize texts is limited to certain age. After that age, it slows down.

Just imagine, if a brain does not receive clear stable image of a character, how the brain may develop its ability to recognize characters. Early intervention may help to send clear stable image of characters to the brain.

Reading is a core brain function of literacy. A brain should establish proper links with human sensors. Development of links between visual, auditory and tactile sensors at childhood is extremely important for literacy development. Library services to children and young adults have unique importance to establish literacy for each individuals.

“Universal Literacy” in SDGs

All United Nations member states approved 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development which includes Sustainable Development Goals, in short SDGs. “Libraries” are not directly mentioned in this strategic document. However, “a world with universal literacy” is mentioned in “Our vision” of the Agenda as one of overarching goals of SDGs. In addition, the 2030 Agenda stresses “leaving no one behind”.

IFLA enthusiastically supports the 2030 Agenda representing global “library field”. “Critical thinking” is required to achieve each goal and target of SDGs. Sharing information and knowledge among all stakeholders to tackle the goals and targets is the key to formulate a consensus for wise decision making for PDCA cycle, Plan, Do, Check and Act.

For example, the 2030 Agenda reiterates critical importance of education as follows:

We commit to providing inclusive and equitable quality education at all levels — early childhood, primary, secondary, tertiary, technical and vocational training. All people, irrespective of sex, age, race or ethnicity, and persons with disabilities, migrants, indigenous peoples, children and youth, especially those in vulnerable situations, should have access to life-long learning opportunities that help them to acquire the knowledge and skills needed to exploit opportunities and to participate fully in society. We will strive to provide children and youth with a nurturing environment for the full realization of their

rights and capabilities, helping our countries to reap the demographic dividend, including through safe schools and cohesive communities and families.

If we really want “leaving no one behind”, promotion of reading among children should be conducted in cooperation with prevention of and early intervention for reading difficulties, which may be caused by diverse of disabilities. Scientific knowledge on reading problems should be shared by parents, doctors, teachers, health workers and librarians. Effective and low cost screening and treatment resources should be in place with relevant policy framework for inclusion of persons with disabilities in line with the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD).

Innovation in near-vision screening of pre-school children

Professor Hitomi Takahashi, Health Education, Faculty of Law, St. Andrew’s University (Momoyama Gakuin Daigaku), has been active to promote near-vision screening at age 3.

Far-vision acuity test helps distinguish children who have difficulties to see a long distance who may receive medical treatment in the early stage. However, children who have difficulties to see near-distance such as textbooks or tablet requires additional near-vision acuity test to get appropriate treatment. Prof. Takahashi and her colleagues argues that “introducing a near-vision visual acuity test will help finding children who cannot see a near distance and prompting them to receive medical treatment, which would guarantee all children the opportunities for learning in the end”.

One of the outcome of her enthusiastic efforts in collaboration with publishers is the award winning picture book with screening kit “Who ate it?”. The intention of this enjoyable picture book is to give understanding on near-vision screening to identify 3 years old kids who are not able to see the book correctly so that they may have professional near-vision acuity test effectively. It is crucial to give appropriate low vision treatment in time, by 6 years old.

The book and screening kit raises awareness on near-vision issues of pre-school children among parents, teachers and librarians in addition to preparedness development of children with near-vision problems for Japanese Standard Vision Acuity Test using Landolt C. Most of the cost of medical treatment including eye glasses for treatment may be covered by health insurance in Japan.

Surprisingly, neither near-vision problems of pre-school children nor this innovative methods for screening are well known among parents, teachers, librarians and even medical doctors and health workers in general.

The role of libraries serving children and young adults with specific needs

Innovations in the library field do not always include cutting edge ICT development but they are always associated with significant mindset change of librarians as well as library users.

The Goal 4 of the SDGs is “Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all”. No doubt, libraries serving children and young adults around the world share this goal and do the best to achieve many of the targets of the Goal 4.

The target “4.2 By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education” well covers the issues around low vision screening and treatment of pre-school children.

“Leaving no one behind” principle encourage librarians to reach out children and young adults with diverse disabilities that prevent them to read conventional library resources. “Target 4.a Build and upgrade education facilities that are child, disability and gender sensitive and provide safe, non-violent, inclusive and effective learning environments for all” is a good internationally recognized policy guidelines to request support from stakeholders and international cooperation partners.

“Print disabilities” is an emerging concept legally defined by the WIPO Marrakesh Treaty to support those who are not able to read print due to disabilities. Libraries will support prevention and treatment of reading problems of pre-school children as much as possible and, at the same time, provide necessary reading materials in alternative format to those print disabled readers.

Alternative format may include following versions: large print, easy-to-read, braille, audio recording, fabric books, accessible motion pictures including sign language interpretation, accessible digital publication such as web, DAISY and EPUB.

WIPO Marrakesh Treaty and ABC

Marrakesh Treaty to Facilitate Access to Published Works for Persons Who Are Blind, Visually Impaired or Otherwise Print Disabled was adopted on June 27, 2013 in Marrakesh and it forms part of the body of international copyright treaties administered by World Intellectual Properties Organization. The Marrakesh Treaty requests governments to implement exemption or exception of copyrights so that legally established entities such as libraries may produce alternative format materials without permission of copyright owners. Alternative format reading materials may be shared globally to serve for print disabled people through Accessible Books Consortium (ABC) established by WIPO.

The Accessible Books Consortium (ABC) which includes organizations that represent people with print disabilities such as the World Blind Union (WBU); libraries for the blind; standards bodies such as DAISY Consortium, and organizations representing authors, publishers and collective management organizations. The goal of ABC is to increase the number of books worldwide in accessible formats and to make them available to people who are print disabled. ABC offers 4 types of services:

- Global Book Service is an on-line catalogue that provides libraries for the blind with the ability to search and make requests for accessible digital books. This international “library-to-library” service allows participating organizations to supplement their collections from their counterparts in other countries free of charge.
- Accessible Publishing: ABC promotes the production of “born accessible” works by publishers, that is, books that are usable directly from the publisher by both sighted persons and people who are print disabled. We provide guidelines on how to produce “born accessible” works and we present an annual award for outstanding achievements in the field of accessible publishing
- Capacity Building: ABC provides training and technical assistance in developing countries in the production and distribution of books in accessible formats. We also provide funding for the production of accessible educational materials in national languages at the primary, secondary and university levels.
- Websites offering accessible books: ABC maintain a list of links of online sources of accessible books, organized by country. The selection includes both libraries and commercial providers.

Conclusion

If you visit the ABC website (<http://www.accessiblebooksconsortium.org/sources/en/>) which offers links to websites in more than 30 countries, you will find opportunities to get alternative format reading materials from those sources.

Librarians in 41 ratified countries and other countries that have decided to join the Marrakesh Treaty Contracting Parties such as Japan and European Union must make the most of the Treaty through ABC services for cross border exchange of accessible format reading materials. Librarians in other countries may develop a country or regional project to apply for ABC Capacity Building.

Publishers may benefit from Accessible Publishing activities of ABC.

As accessibility of published works evolves, different accessibility requirements and barriers caused by reasons other than disabilities will become more and more visible.

Blind people require non-visual information such as audio or tactile while deaf people require everything is visible. Harmonization of conflicting requirements through universal design process is the only solution to meet the requirements of everybody. Synchronization of audio and visual information is the most promising solution.

Reducing the cost is another key factor to make reading opportunities available and affordable. Open and non-proprietary international standard development is yet another key to make solutions available to everybody.

In conclusion, librarians serving children and young adults may best support target users from their pre-school age by raising awareness on near-vision problems to guarantee access to reading not only by provision of conventional print materials but also alternative format reading materials. Librarians must make the most of existing measures to support reading of users with specific needs with an awareness on conflicting requirements which can be harmonized by development of international open standards for accessible multimedia such as WCAG 2.1, EPUB Accessibility 1.0 and ITU-T H.702.

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