

**TEACHING PROFESSION FOR BLIND PEOPLE
IN THE INDONESIAN CONTEXT**

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Indonesia is a country with the population of about 220 million people, and about two million people are estimated to be blind or partially sighted. Despite the high unemployment rate among blind people in this country, teaching appears to be a promising profession for them. In this paper I will relate how a blind person can function as a teacher, mainly based on my personal experience.

I have been teaching since 1976 when I was still a student of IKIP, a teacher's college in Bandung, Indonesia, where I took English as my major. I started this profession by giving private English lessons to students whose parents wanted them to do better in English class in school, or to employees who hoped to be sent abroad by their employers for short visits. This was

when I was in the third year of college. My class usually consisted of one to three students. To prepare the lessons, I had to transcribe textbooks into Braille while my students used the regular print book.

Later on I made contact with some English-speaking expatriates living in Bandung, and a couple of them asked me to teach them Indonesian. This was the beginning of my profession as a teacher of Indonesian as a foreign language. By word of mouth, I continued to have foreign students until 1998 (when the monetary crisis seriously attacked the Indonesian economy and most of the foreign experts had to leave as projects were discontinued). As a private teacher, I went to the students' home to give them lessons. As I had to come by public transport and had to go to locations I only knew from their verbal description on the telephone, there was the challenge of orientation and mobility for the first meeting. What I enjoyed most of the contact with my foreign students was their attitude. My blindness did not seem to matter for them. And above all, I was also paid handsomely – that was very helpful in supporting my newly independent life.

My first encounter of teaching a big class in a large school was in 1980 when I was appointed as a teacher at SGPLB (teachers college of special education) in Bandung where I taught English. Among the challenges were:

- Orienting the college building. To overcome this, before my work days started, I asked a friend to make the map of the building for

me and then had him give me a tour of the building and its surroundings.

- Writing lesson plan in standardized format – with a lot of columns. This was at the time when manual regular typewriter was my only access to print writing. I had to do a lot of counting spaces with high concentration to be sure that I typed on the right column. Why typing instead of Braille? Only to make sure that the supervision staff had access to my lesson plan.
- Recognizing each of my students auditorily. You know very well that only people with distinct voice or those that I have heard speaking many times that are readily recognizable to me.
- Keeping the students' attention during lesson. One effective way of keeping their attention is by asking them questions from time to time. It is important that I have the list of the students in Braille so that it will be easier to name them when I ask them to respond to my questions.
- Writing on the board in case I needed to explain something that was not in the handout. I can write block letters (from memorizing the shape of each character and the movement my hand has made). The problem is that I cannot read what I have written myself even for the purpose of erasing it. So I always had a student erase it for me.
- Reading students' written work and giving feedback in writing. This was before the scanning technology was introduced in Indonesia.

So, in this case, I had to depend completely upon the help of a sighted reader.

In 1994 I was transferred to UPI (the university where I have been teaching up until today). In addition to teaching English, with my new qualifications, here I also teach other special-education-related subjects such as Braille, orientation and mobility, and special education as a discipline, both in the undergraduate and master programmes. Here I find new challenges as well as new solutions due to new technology. With a laptop computer and LCD screen, I don't need to worry about writing on the board for the class. The speech screen reading software gives blind people access to computer. In order not to disturb the students with the synthetic voice of my computer, I use an earphone on one ear to read the computer screen and use the other ear for the students' feedback. Reading by listening and talking at the same time is a new challenge that can be overcome only by distributing attention. However, the task could be easier if I had a computer with the Braille display.

Alternatively, I also learned how to prepare overheads and operate the overhead projector. In order to follow what is displayed on the overhead screen, I make a Braille copy of the material and give a special mark on the Braille page to indicate the first line of the next print page. This way I know when to put a new overhead sheet on the display. Again, this task could be made easier if I had a Braille printer that simultaneously prints ink characters on the same page.

Being a university lecturer cannot avoid extensive reading. Luckily, with a scanner, I can read print books independently and store them in my computer memory. Internet access is also indeed very helpful in enriching knowledge.

Teaching seems to be the most favourite profession among blind intellectuals in Indonesia. This is due to the fact that the Indonesian government is accommodative in employing blind people as teachers (particularly in special schools for the blind), and teachers colleges are open to blind students. There have been cases of rejection from time to time, but organizations of the blind are consistent in advocating for the rights of blind people as citizens. Currently there are about 200 teachers who are blind all over Indonesia. Most of them are special schoolteachers and a few are teaching at universities, but none is working in regular schools of primary and secondary levels. The most obvious problem they are facing is the lack of handbooks in Braille. Very often they must spend a lot of time transcribing their own handbooks into Braille manually. Assistive technology is still too expensive for the majority of blind people in Indonesia. However, in spite of the problem and some others, teaching profession is still promising for blind people in Indonesia.