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The Digital Access Show

Season 3, Episode 33 — Catharina Williams-van Klinken

Transcript

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[Narelle] Hello! Welcome to another episode of The Digital Access Show. Again, another difference this week. And, you know, look, if it looks a bit awkward at times, I'll tell you why in a minute. So, I'm Narelle Wright, and I'm the host, and we have a lovely lady, Catharina Williams-van Klinken is our guest this week. Now, if we appear offside at times or not sitting straight, we both have severe vision impairment. So, we're checking each other saying, are you sitting straight? Am I sitting straight? And welcome, Catharina. Thank you so much for coming on the show.

Meet Catharina

[Catharina] Thank you. It's a privilege.

[Narelle] Catharina, tell me, tell us a bit about yourself, where you live, because you do have a very interesting background.

[Catharina] Yeah, I was born in the Netherlands and grew up in Australia, and married an Australian. And we, since our teenage years, we independently dreamt of moving... to a developing country. And we finally managed to do that 24 years ago. We moved to East Timor, 24 years next month. And we've been here ever since, following our childhood dream.

[Narelle] Oh, how awesome. And the thing I'm really interested about is, for you living in East Timor with a severe vision impairment, how's it been?

[Catharina] Well, my husband said a while ago that I'm probably better off in Timor than in Australia, because I can afford to pay for help. And there are a lot of people to help me like over the road. I can afford a taxi. I can afford to pay readers,

as we'll talk about later. Yeah. I can afford to pay for household help. And people are used to helping older people. And in Timor, I am old.

[Narelle] Really? -

[Catharina] Yeah. -

[Narelle] Okay.

[Narelle] So, we're old. Okay. I've changed my mind. No, I'm not changing my mindset. We're still young. We're all cool. **[Catharina laughs]**

Language, Linguistics and Translation

[Narelle] Okay. What do you do for some work? That's the other very interesting part of your background.

[Catharina] Yeah. I'm a linguist. And I have two jobs, both in the same university. I'm head of the Language Centre, at a local university, and there I'm professor of Tétun. Tétun is the main language we use in Timor. It's one of the two official languages along with Portuguese. And my other job is Bible translation, directing a Bible translation, also into Tétun. So, a lot of work on Tétun, including teaching... my current lessons that I'm giving is on interpreting, translation and interpreting.

Screen Readers and Tétun

[Narelle] Well, how do you go using screen readers, voiceover tools, with Tétun? Is that language available? Because it's not one of the main languages, is it? Not one of the so-called common languages.

[Catharina] It's not. So, what the vision impaired community here, who have access to phones do, is they use Indonesian to read Tétun. It sounds a bit like this. I'll tell you how... a sentence using... Dutch pronunciation of English.

[Narelle] Yep.

[Catharina] E um hoeing home-y. Now, can you guess what that means? If you read it in your head, you can say E must be I, um must be am, hoeing must be going, home-y must be home. And that's how they read Tétun. You get a bit used to

it, but it's really awful. So, that's how I listen to my Tétun... messages, but I prefer to read them visually. We have been working on getting... NVDA for Tétun, because NVDA is open access. So, together with a nephew, a very smart nephew and friend, we worked on getting a Tétun text-to-speech reader, and it worked, sort of. It sounded a little bit like this. I think I AM... having difficulty reading this. And you'd think, excuse me? Like, all the pronunciation was there, but the intonation was really weird. Currently, I've given all our data to an Indonesian... lecturer, a researcher in Indonesia who's going to have another go at it. It's not that my nephew and friend can't do it, but they are both... very, very busy people. Anyone who is that level of AI is very busy. So, we put a lot of work into it, but we haven't got the results yet, but we will.

[Narelle] And NVDA, for those that don't know it, is... a screen reader.

[Catharina] Text-to-speech, screen reader.

[Narelle] Yeah, yeah. That's actually really interesting, because, I mean, you just assume, don't you? You look at something and you think, oh, I'll read it in English. But there's a lot of... unusual languages in the world, languages that are not used as commonly as, say, French, English, Spanish, Italian, German. And the pronunciation, the translation's still got to be there.

[Catharina] Yes. I've got voiceover set up... for four languages. When my parents were still alive, on some weeks, I'd feel like it was a really good week, I'd spoken five languages. But now it's four. Now that they've passed away, I don't use Dutch much. So, I can get SMS, WhatsApp messages in... Tétun mostly, English and Tétun, but also I get, recently, I had a report from one of my lecturers in Portuguese, or we get invitations in Portuguese. And on the work... WhatsApp list, there are a lot of messages in Indonesian. And they can be completely mixed, so I just give up. If you really want to contact me, do it directly.

[Narelle] How do you actually manage, as a vision impaired person, when you're jumping between the different languages in WhatsApp? It's not going to say... this is in English, and this is in Tétun, or whatever.

[Catharina] I can still see enough to read short messages.

[Narelle] Yep.

[Catharina] And that's what I do, Or a lot of the time, I think blow it, just... It might not be important enough. If it is, they'll write to me again.

[Narelle] Yeah, and that's an interesting aspect. But even the Bible, like we were talking last week, I was talking to another couple of friends, we were talking about the fact that Johannes Gutenberg... actually printed, you know, created the movable printing press in 1440, I think it was, early 14, mid-1400s. But people still couldn't access the information, because it was in Latin. And we're talking again, it's... the tools are there, but it's how you use the tools. It's the same thing again, isn't it?

[Catharina] Yes, that's right. Yep.

[Narelle] And it's the same with the Bible. I mean, the Bible was, in 1400s, was printed in Latin. A guy called William Tyndale, in the 1520s, actually translated into English.

[Catharina] That's right.

Accessible Translation Tools and Human Readers

[Narelle] We're looking again at your translating into Tétun, to give access for people in their own language.

[Catharina] That's right. And this is becoming, we've got a great team, but the programs I use for Bible translation are not accessible. It's really sad. Nora is a program that I use for dictionary writing. So, that's three programs that I would normally use a lot. None of them are properly accessible, or they all have extremely limited accessibility.

[Narelle] So how does it work?

[Catharina] For dictionary writing, I get someone to do data entry, and then they have to read it to me. But realistically, the information that goes into a dictionary entry can have... Tétun, English, Portuguese, and Indonesian all mixed in in one

sentence. So, a screen reader would not do that anyway. I'd better explain, Timor was a, East Timor was a Portuguese colony for many years, several centuries, and was under Indonesian occupation for 24 years, and then became independent. So, that's why it's that combination of languages.

[Narelle] Yeah.

[Catharina] So, I have to get a human reader, and I've only... just started doing that a few weeks ago. It's really good, but the really good people are busy, and suddenly don't turn up, and you think, you know, you think I used to be able to just read this, and now I'm stuck because... this person didn't turn up. For Bible translation too, I have decided that I need human readers. So, today we were doing like a check of long stretches of text, and I got some students to read, to read like 20 chapters of the Tétun translation, so that I could listen to it and read along. If I listen to it and read along, I can still get it. But if I read on my own, I get a lot of really strange translations. I think, what, did we say that? **[Catharina laughs]** And it's just that I read it wrong. So... So for now, I can still just read along, which is really useful for getting formatting, but for getting the meaning, I listen. Again, I found readers who are good, and you can say to them, look at the last word in this verse, and see what it means in the commentaries. But you have to train them. And... the really trainable, good people are busy.

[Narelle] How frustrating.

[Catharina] It is.

[Narelle] And... And what's the end result? Your work obviously has to slow down, because... you've become reliant on others again, isn't it?

[Catharina] It does. It does. I've concluded that everything to do with... visual impairment slows you down. -

[Narelle] Yeah. -

[Catharina] Yeah.

[Narelle] Yeah, it does.

[Catharina] Except maybe reading novels, which you can read faster, because you turn it on to a higher speed.

[Narelle] Oh, don't give away those secrets. That's the secret between us, that, you know, the speed we do read at. It's the good old Donald Duck analogy, isn't it? Because when people hear what I listen at, and they say, how can you understand it? But your brain adapts.

Working, Teaching and Managing Staff

[Catharina] I've slowly increased the speed over the years.

[Narelle] Yeah. With your work with linguistics, as well at the university, you'd be in the same boat again, wouldn't you, with translation, with managing staff? Because you'd be managing staff who have... different languages.

[Catharina] And writing memos in Tétun, which I can no longer read and it can't read back to me. So, now the head of department sits with me while I write it, so that he can check whether I got it right.

[Narelle] Yep.

[Catharina] For teaching, yeah, I found a way to teach that works for now. I have a large screen, and I know the material very, very well, because I wrote it myself, and I've been... a translator, interpreter for 20 years. So, I don't have to read much. When I do have to read, like when there's exercises or quotes, every week, I have an assistant, and they read it for me. And they actually like it. They're all training to be teachers, so it is good experience for them. So, that is working. All their homework, they have to submit in soft copy, and then they come and read it to me, not because, well, I can't read the Tétun. But it also allows me to check for cheating, because then I can ask them questions about it. **[Narelle laughs]**

[Catharina] See if they've done it by AI, because even Tétun homework can be done by AI these days.

[Narelle] Wow.

[Catharina] And exams I cannot mark. I can't see the results, so I get... a group of teachers together, and I tell them what the answers are and they mark them. And then I give them a really good morning tea. **[Narelle laughs]**

[Narelle] Look, it's the way you have to live, isn't it? Because what other choices have you got? -

[Catharina] That's right. -

[Narelle] Yeah.

[Catharina] So, I think I'm still, yeah. I can do not as much as when I could do it visually, but I'm doing more than if I forced myself to read it, and got really frustrated, and, and got a lot of things wrong.

[Narelle] What about the management of staff? Because, again, you know, when you're looking at the management of staff and... KPIs, and all of those things, you'd have a similar problem again, wouldn't you?

[Catharina] A problem is that I don't know which staff member is talking. I've got 40 staff and, yeah, as you know, one of the first early things to go is recognition of people. So, I try to teach them to say, hello, I'm Leo, even if they saw me just half an hour before.

[Narelle] Yep.

[Catharina] I might remember that Leo's wearing black cause he's in mourning.

[Narelle] Yep.

[Catharina] But the other day, the other day I was really sad, because one of my staff came and asked for a month's leave without pay... on health grounds. And he's 30, highly energetic, highly motivated. And I could hear that he wasn't well, but I couldn't see. And later my other staff told me, gee, he looks sick. He looks so terrible. His eyes are sunken and he's lost weight. And I thought, pfft. I wish I could've seen that, and been even stronger about his need to... not just rest but to get medical attention. So, you can't look after people as well as you'd like.

[Narelle] No, you can't. You definitely can't. And I think that's probably... the thing I find the hardest as well, that the people you really care about, you will listen for changes in their voice. But you can't read the body language. You can't see their facial expressions. You don't know what they look like.

[Catharina] You don't know whether they're crying. One of my staff was, when we were working together a while ago, and someone else told me and I thought, man, I had no idea.

[Narelle] Yeah.

[Catharina] Just go on.

[Narelle] Yeah! We just go on. And... it is... blindness, vision impairment, we are so dependent on that written word now, aren't we? It's the only way we can manage... the digital tools that we live with all the time, just to do what we want to do.

[Catharina] I'm very grateful for them, despite their huge limitations in my case, but I am very grateful.

Life in Timor-Leste

[Narelle] Yeah. It's... an interesting way that you're living. What are the benefits? Other than the fact that you can employ, you know, you can... afford to get more help... at reasonable costs. What are the other benefits... for living in a country, such as East Timor, when you are vision impaired?

[Catharina] Most of them are the same benefits as... people who aren't vision impaired. It's just... it's... challenging. And you feel like you can make some sort of difference, not as much as when I was young that I used to think I'd be able to make, but... you can make some sort of difference. I do believe that. Timor is also an exceedingly beautiful country. I used to love riding around the mountains on my bicycle. And since I no longer dare to do that, my husband's been very gracious and gotten that tandem. And so we still get out there into the, into the... less so into the mountains, but we still get out a lot on the tandem on weekends. He's also gotten me a kayak. And I find kayaking on the ocean, when the winds are right, is just incredibly freeing because there's no one to run into and no roads to cross. Yeah, it's

just really freeing and it's beautiful out there. So, that's something I wouldn't be able to do if I lived in Brisbane.

[Narelle] Oh, definitely not. Definitely not. One other question, going back to your work as a linguist, you would be dealing with people from other countries, all the time. As a researcher...

[Catharina] My staff do. We have a department that teaches Tétun to foreigners. And they have taught Tétun to people from 80, more than 80 countries, over the years.

[Narelle] Yeah.

[Catharina] But I normally don't deal with them, unless they have special requests.

[Narelle] But on those special requests, how do you manage again? Because... Trying to explain to someone else, I actually can't see you, but I do know what I'm doing.

[Catharina] That's all right. I just say it.

[in unison] Yeah.

[Catharina] I just say it.

Tips for Digital Access and Learning Audio

[Narelle] Catharina, what are a couple of good tips you can give to anyone listening in regards to... digital communication, different languages? Because I don't think people realise at times... people where English is a second language... struggle with what you're struggling with, don't they?

[Catharina] I imagine so. Although, if they are from one of the mainstream languages, then NVDA and VoiceOver have them.

[Narelle] Yep.

[Catharina] And you can do that. It's the minority languages, which is a lot of languages, that have this problem. Most people in the world can speak one of the majority languages, even if it's not their preferred medium of... communication.

[Narelle] Yep.

[Catharina] In some ways, I feel like I'm the wrong person to ask, because I would say practice. But I started learning NVDA under a very good tutor, Mark Muscat, some years ago, thinking I'd get practice in before I needed it. And I did. I really put a lot of effort in, but it was at that stage easier to read than to listen. My whole education system favours learning through eyes over ears,

[Narelle] Yep.

[Catharina] And maybe that's my nature too. So, I just kept listening, I kept reading rather than listening.

[Narelle] Yep.

[Catharina] Now that I am needing it, I'm finding that... quite a lot of the skills are still there, particularly... the keystrokes, quite a lot of them are still there, but I didn't practise as much as I should have. **[Narelle laughs]**

[Catharina] NVDA 2, you started teaching me in January. And before that, I was really afraid. Like, I'd hear my older sister who also has Stargardt's, she'd be using voiceover. I think, oh, it just talks incessantly. And a few times I'd accidentally started voiceover and I couldn't stop it. And I was just really afraid of it. So, having a few lessons, it was even only two lessons with you, helped me to get over that fear, and to be able to start learning.

[Narelle] Yeah.

[Catharina] Again, I still didn't practice like I thought I would, but... I feel like I'm falling off a cliff at the moment, and going from visual to audio is... So, every day I'm using voiceover for more and more programs. I'm using it for my exercise program. I'm using it for... Bible reading. I'm using it for, yeah, to some extent, for WhatsApp. So, Some program, yeah, I'm just being forced to do it. So, the skills I

learned before I needed it, are very helpful, but it would've been great if I'd practised more.

[Narelle laughs] Look, I'm in the same boat. I remember, because Mark Muscat taught me. I think we talked about this before. And when I was starting to lose my sight, I remember Mark saying you have to practice. And I'm like, gosh, maybe you're right. I can do this. And I'd get home, and you know, when you've got kids, and you've gotta do dinner, da, da, da. And I think I'll just practice in a minute. I'd think, oh my gosh. I've got to practice. Now, it's just, and like my sight, I still use my sight at times. But I'm at the stage now where I think, oh, it's so much easier when I can close my eyes and just listen.

[Catharina] Yep. Yeah. So, practice is good. Someone years ago told me, his wife had gone blind in midlife, and he told me to start listening to... books or anything in audio. And I'm very grateful for that advice, because like I've been doing my novel reading, Bible reading, quite a lot of books reading by audio for a long time now. And so, it does help me to learn to listen, not just read. Yeah, I think a second bit of advice is... to, if you can afford it, to get a lesson. You didn't tell me that, to ask that, but... it has been very helpful, partly to get over the fear and partly, I tried to learn things from, you know, YouTube, and it makes it look so easy. And then suddenly you come across a problem and you just can't, it... drove me nuts. So, if you can get lessons from someone who's further ahead it's very useful. And I think the third, my third... little bit of advice would be that... we just have to accept that it is not as fast or as complete... as doing things visually. But it's faster and more complete than not doing them at all. So, we have a lot of it. We just have to accept it, I think, which is very frustrating. But we do have to accept it, otherwise... we're going to give up. And that doesn't seem like a life worth living.

[Narelle] I think that last bit of advice is perfect. You're right. One of my cousins, his mum was... blind, my aunty Vera was blind. And I was talking to him not long ago, and I said something. Aunty Vera had, I think it was scarlet fever, whatever she had when she was a child, so she had very limited sight. She brought up three sons. She had to make the clothes. I mean, God, Stu would be 80 now, 81. Yeah. During the war years, World War II, she had to make the clothes. She had to cook on a

wood stove, she had to clean, supervise the housework, because my uncle was out running the place. And she did it. And... She just had to do it. There was no options. I think today, with the tools we've got today, aren't we lucky... that we're not like... that?

[Catharina] That sounds very difficult.

Contact and Closing

[Narelle] It must've been. Must've been terribly difficult. I mean, she had a little bit of sight. I don't know how much. I remember when I met her... years later, and she had nothing then. And I sat and thought, well, how did you do it, Aunty Vera? But... you just have to. Catharina, how can people get in contact with you if they want to learn more about your work? Or, you know, just find out more about... your advice?

[Catharina] I don't think I'd be coming to me for advice unless it's for how to deal with Tétun. Email is good.

[Narelle] Yep. It's CWVK @livethedream, as one word, .tl. TL is short for Timor-Leste, which is the Portuguese name for East Timor, and the official name.

[Narelle] Catharina, thank you. Thank you so much. Look, I love talking to you. I have some great conversations with you, and I appreciate your time tonight. Go and enjoy your cuppa. And for everyone that's listening, please like, subscribe, share, review. Tell us what you think because we all live with barriers, different barriers. Catharina and I just can't see much, and I hope we didn't move too much, so we were sitting straight on. And we'll see you next week on The Digital Access Show. Bye, bye. **[music playing]**