

The role of Easy Language awareness for Social Inclusion in Latvia, Lithuania, and Slovenia

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Abstract. Easy Language serves as a communication tool designed for use by a broad spectrum of individuals within our society. Like any tool, it requires development, adjustment, and application standards. Some of these standards are common across languages and societies, while others are unique to specific languages, groups of people, or needs. This implies that language users, developers, and researchers can benefit from cooperation but also need to develop their own language- and situation-specific tools and standards of communication.

The aim of this research is to compare the change in Easy Language awareness from 2021 to 2022 among societies in Latvia, Lithuania, and Slovenia within a year, using such tools as surveys, in-depth interviews,

and statistical analysis. The findings suggest that awareness levels vary across different countries and social groups. Furthermore, it takes more than two years to reach the levels of legal structures and political readiness necessary to embrace the needs of the entire society.

Keywords: *Easy Language, awareness, attitude, bilingualism, disability*

Sąmoningumo lengvai suprantamos kalbos atžvilgiu svarba socialinei įtraukčiai Latvijoje, Lietuvoje ir Slovėnijoje

Anotacija. Lengvai suprantama kalba – tai metodas, kuriuo įtraukiami bendraujama su visuomene, atliepiant jos įvairius poreikius. Kaip ir kiti metodai, lengvai suprantama kalba yra nuolat tobulinama, jai keliami tam tikri reikalavimai. Kai kurie reikalavimai yra bendri, o kai kurie – taikomi tam tikrai kalbai, tam tikrai žmonių grupei ar tam tikriems individualiems poreikiams atliepti. Tai reiškia, kad kalbų vartotojams ir tyrėjams naudinga bendradarbiauti, tačiau jie taip pat turi kurti savo kalbai ar kontekstui aktualius komunikacijos metodus ir standartus.

Šiame tyrime keliamas tikslas palyginti, kaip per vienerius metus (nuo 2021 iki 2022 metų) pasikeitė tai, kaip Latvijos, Lietuvos ir Slovėnijos visuomenės suvokia lengvai suprantamą kalbą, kiek sąmoningos yra jos atžvilgiu. Tyrime taikomi apklausos, kurioje dalyvavo 1500 dalyvių iš 3 šalių, 3 diskusijų grupių su 27 specialistais, ir statistinės analizės metodai.

Tyrime paaiškėjo, kad sąmoningumo lengvai suprantamos kalbos atžvilgiu lygis tiriamosiose šalyse įvairuoja. Nors didelio pokyčio nematyti, tyrimas parodė keletą teigiamų pokyčių požiūrio į lengvai suprantamą kalbą atžvilgiu. Pavyzdžiui, visuomenės supratimas, kad lengvai suprantama kalba yra naudinga visai visuomenei, išaugo. Tyrimas parodė ir tai, kad skiriasi skirtingų socialinių grupių sąmoningumas lengvai suprantamos kalbos atžvilgiu. Pavyzdžiui, tyrimas atskleidė specialistų, dirbančių su lengvai suprantamos kalbos tikslinėmis grupėmis, sąmoningumo lygio augimą, tačiau apskritai visuomenė netapo reikšmingai sąmoningesnė šiuo požiūriu. Tyrimas atskleidė ir tai, kad reikia kur kas daugiau negu dvejų metų, kad teisiškai ir politiškai būtų pasirengta atliepti visos visuomenės poreikius.

Raktažodžiai: *lengvai suprantama kalba, sąmoningumas, požiūris, dvikalbystė, negalia*

1. Introduction

Easy Language is a specially adapted linguistic code designed to convey intended meanings through commonly used words and concise sentences, ensuring easy comprehension by a wide audience. It finds application across various genres and purposes, including entertainment (literary compositions), information dissemination (administrative documents), educational materials (textbooks), regulatory and legal documentation (rules and instructions), as well as business communication (advertisements and marketing).

The two defining characteristics of Easy Language – its clarity and its applicability in diverse communicative contexts – underscore the challenge it poses to all members of society. Its effectiveness hinges upon our inclusive attitudes towards fellow members of society and our awareness of linguistic features that may hinder comprehension for certain segments of the population. Consequently, this paper aims to explore language awareness within different cultural, geographical, and social contexts.

2. Definition of the Easy Language concept

In today's era of globalisation and digitalisation, society is facing an increasing volume of information. However, a significant portion of the population requires special support to access this information

unless the language is adjusted to accommodate them. As Krastiņa and Valdmane (2020) assert, “any text can be adapted to the needs of the reader: by simplifying it, shortening it, dividing it into text fragments, supplementing it, otherwise adapting it to suit the language learner’s needs and language skills”. The principles of Easy Language entail the adaptation of texts for individuals with various conditions, including intellectual disabilities, neuropsychiatric disorders (such as ADHD, autism, Asperger’s syndrome, and Tourette’s syndrome), dyslexia, aphasia, as well as those who benefit from such materials during language acquisition, such as immigrants or children (Veckalne, 2020).

In English, we encounter two terms: ‘Easy-to-Read’ (also ‘easy info’, ‘easy access’ or ‘aphasia friendly’) and ‘Plain Language’ (also ‘plain writing’ or ‘layman terms’). The term ‘Easy-to-Read’ primarily refers to written text, where “not only the choice of words is important, but also their layout, conceptual connection, and visual perception” (Kıřkere, 2017: 9). Presently, the term ‘Easy Language’ is increasingly used in Europe to encompass both written and spoken language. However, the Australian Center for Inclusive Design suggests that Easy English is targeted at a narrower audience, including individuals with low literacy, intellectual disabilities, and English as a second language, while plain language is intended for those with advanced literacy.

The term ‘Easy Language’ has also been adopted and translated in several other languages:

- (1) For instance, in Spanish, it is referred to as *lectura fácil* and *lenguaje claro*; in Italian, as *linguaggio facile de leggere* and *linguaggio semplice*;
- (2) In Swedish, it is known as *lättläst* and *klarspråk*, highlighting the search for the most suitable and precise terminology;
- (3) German also distinguishes between different language levels. Silvia Hansen-Schirra and Christiane Maaß’s publication “Easy Language Research: Text and User Perspectives” (Hansen-Schirra, Maaß, 2020: 18) identifies four language levels: *Fachsprache* (Standard Purpose Language), *Standardprache* (Standard Language), *Einfache Sprache* (Simplified/Clear Language, equivalent to Easy Language), and *Leichte Sprache* (Simple Language, equivalent to Easy Language).

The concept of Easy Language as an adapted language version for specific target audiences has been around for at least 50 years and has been researched across time and space, as can be seen in Lindholm and Vanhatalo’s (2021) *Handbook of Easy Language*. Thus, we could say that language users and researchers are partly aware of the existence of Easy Language as a concept.

Apart from examining the awareness of Easy Language in theoretical sources, this article aims to examine the use of the concept of language awareness in social and professional perception across Latvia, Lithuania, and Slovenia in different groups of society over the period of two years: 2021-2022. Quantitative and qualitative data analysis suggests that there is partial knowledge about Easy Language, which varies among different social groups. It also suggests that research activities such as surveys and focus group discussions can inform not only researchers and professionals working in the field, but also members of the target groups of Easy Language themselves.

Firstly, the target group and users of Easy Language must be seen as the owners of the concept: Lindholm and Vanhatalo (2021: 15) point out the role of Easy Language and its users in an inclusive society: “It is important to ensure that Easy Language is a publicly available, neutral and non-stigmatised option for all public communication in society. In the spirit of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), the target groups of Easy Language have and should have an important role in the development of Easy Language”.

Secondly, we need to examine the research community's awareness of Easy Language as a research topic. As Lindholm and Vanhatalo (2021: 16) observe, "even though specific languages may differ as research objects, we need common methods and theoretical views: as the research tradition is only just taking shape... as Easy Language is clearly a multidisciplinary research subject, and is interesting for researchers of, for example, health sciences, sociology, language technology, economics, and service design".

3. Attitudes to Easy Language in different contexts

Research into attitudes to Easy Language and its users has uncovered a range of different attitudes and beliefs about technology, business, finance, and citizenship.

- (1) Attitudes towards Easy Language in the use of technology. Lindholm and Vanhatalo (2021: 45) suggest the view that people with disabilities are not capable of using the internet and technology. This may actually be a sign of the reluctance of staff in the disability sector to use technology: "Easy Language has been seen as a disability issue only, combined with the long outdated view that people with learning difficulties and disabilities are incapable of using the internet. Fortunately, this attitude is changing today, although the general reluctance of staff in the disability sector to use information technology and technology is often not very helpful" (Lindholm and Vanhatalo 2021: 45).
- (2) Attitudes to Easy Language in business. Cinkove and Latimer (2021: 129), discussing attitudes to Easy Language in the Czech Republic, point to the interest of the business community in Easy Language users, although they question the sincerity of their attitude: "Inspired by the business practice (and certainly also by the European institutions), particularly public administration strives to conceive (or at least to present) its activities as a service to citizens and to communicate accordingly; that is, in a forthcoming and friendly manner, and to give 'user-friendly' advice to different agendas. It is pointless to argue whether or not this attitude is 'sincere'".
- (3) Attitudes to Easy Language in education. Leskelä (2021: 154) contrasts the generally positive attitude with the lack of action in the fields of law and education: "Easy Language is well-established in Finland in practice, but its official and legal status remains rather weak. However, the general attitude towards Easy Language is mainly positive". She reiterates the same contrast in the following way: "no formal pathways exist for training Easy Language experts, and research on the topic is limited. On the other hand, the general attitude towards Easy Language is quite positive" (Leskelä (2021: 158).
- (4) Attitudes to Easy Language in research. Leskelä (2021: 182) highlights the connection between the work on Easy Language and the general attitude towards linguistic research and the resources available to it as a result of the negative attitude: "Traditionally, linguistic expertise is not very highly valued in Finland. ... overall, the promotion of Easy Language is not ignored or rejected because of negative attitudes towards, for example, people with disabilities; it is ignored or rejected because language itself is seen as a less important factor... and as an extra drain of finances that takes resources away from other language projects which are already hard pressed for funds".
- (5) Attitudes to Easy Language in literary text publication circles. Some Easy Language audiences, such as the deaf or the elderly, are very receptive to texts in Easy Language, but the general attitude is that they are less valuable to society because they use Easy Language. Literary translations into Easy Language face a similar problem - part of society sees them as low-value, literally discrediting publications (Anča and Melņika 2021: 315).

Thus, from the list above, we can see that Easy Language is not just a theoretical concept but has garnered attention and responses across various social, business, educational, and literary publication groups. The attitudes of the authors of the *Handbook of Easy Language* (2021) span from negative (4) and stigmatising (5) to positive (2 & 3). Additionally, they note that attitudes are changing (1), which is encouraging.

Based on previous research, the list above provides a rich source of ideas and a point of reference for researchers from other countries, which we will return to in the empirical part of this study. One aspect that has not been addressed, however, is overt versus covert attitudes, although Leskelä (2021: 154) briefly touches on the disparity between words and actions, signalling a potential clash between publicly stated attitudes – of which we are all aware – and personal and covert attitudes. Therefore, we will now turn to the awareness of Easy Language.

4. Awareness of Easy Language

Easy Language awareness in society is closely related to language attitudes, as suggested by Rosseel, Speelman, and Geeraerts (2018). In the linguistic tradition of attitude research, awareness has always been considered a key concept, as argued by, for example, Kristiansen (2010), who distinguishes between overt/public/conscious and covert/private/unconscious attitudes. Language users are assumed to be aware of the former and potentially unaware of the latter. The authors emphasise the role of awareness in enabling us to control our attitudes.

Language awareness per se is defined as knowledge of language, enhanced consciousness and sensitivity to the forms and functions of language (Carter 2003), so we might suggest that, like general language awareness, Easy Language awareness is knowledge of its existence. However, in contrast to general language awareness, if we examine the collocations in Lindholm and Vanhatalo's (2021) *Handbook of Easy Language*, Easy Language awareness is not only seen as knowledge of its existence, but also as a precondition for the integration of different groups into social processes, their legal framework, and academic settings. If we look at the frequency of the concepts, we can see that the concept of *awareness* is used 72 times in the *Handbook on Easy Language*, while the concept of *attitudes* is used only 37 times, almost twice as rarely, even though most of the articles have the subtitle “General attitude to Easy Language”, suggesting the common framework provided for the authors. This suggests that the concept of awareness might also allow us to capture a wider range of different aspects of our relationship with Easy Language.

4.1. Awareness of Easy Language in an international context

If we examine the collocations and contexts in which the word *awareness* is used, we can see that, in contrast to *attitudes*, we are immediately addressing a wider context: not only the familiar society at home, but also awareness of processes taking place in other countries, as well as the presence of different cultural and linguistic groups within our own societies, and the potential of Easy Language to integrate society. Lindholm and Vanhatalo (2021: 23) mention awareness of international contexts in the introduction to their handbook:

Hopefully, awareness of the actions of different countries will lead to multifaceted cooperation. It is quite certain that we in Europe can learn a great deal from what has been done for accessible communication in the world's multilingual communities.

Leskelä (2021: 180) also stresses the role of general awareness of the need for Easy Language as a result of participation in international projects across Europe:

In many ways, the prospects of Easy Language in Finland are promising. General awareness of the need for Easy Language and research on the topic is growing. International co-operation between European countries has intensified and expanded views on Easy Language.

Public awareness of the needs of all members of society is increased by the awareness of social processes in the EU, but also by the efforts of legislative organisations to make their communications accessible to all members of society; see Anča and Meļņika (2021: 308):

For a long time, the activities of many organisations, including the Easy Language Agency, were limited due to a lack of national interest and public awareness. However, by 2019, interest in the need for Easy Language had increased, possibly due to the new EU legislation on accessibility to public websites. This gave rise to the restoration of the Easy Language Agency and its activities.

The result of the awareness of the role of Easy Language in public communication brings the idea of the lack of awareness at home. For example, Šumskienė and Baltrūnaitė, (2021: 328) explain the link between traditional attitudes of exclusion leading to the stigmatisation of parts of society in Lithuania:

Lithuania inherited a widely developed network of large residential social care institutions for people with intellectual and psychosocial disabilities. The decades of exclusion that people with disabilities had experienced had resulted in stigmatizing attitudes towards them, a lack of awareness of their rights in society, and a restriction-oriented disability policy.

Thus, we can conclude that acknowledging the lack of awareness is the first and necessary step towards raising awareness, or as Šumskienė and Baltrūnaitė (2021: 334) suggest:

it allows researchers to inform society of disabilities, to raise awareness of the rights of people with disabilities, and to fight stigma, stereotypes, and incorrect practices in all fields of life. The information includes disability-related articles, reports, messages, and awareness-raising initiatives.

4.2. Increased awareness of bilinguals and second language users

Awareness of international contexts also brings awareness of intercultural elements within our own society: Bovim Bugge et al. (2021: 390) discuss the awareness of minorities and their representation in literary texts:

In Norway, awareness that readers with minority backgrounds should also find themselves represented in literature is increased. This issue should be reflected on further: Who writes books and who communicates the books? Who are the editors and the critics? To truly create a literate society that includes everyone, this perspective should be reflected on not only in the literature itself but also in the structures surrounding the literature.

We can read about the growing awareness of bilingualism in society and the potential of second language writers (Bovim Bugge et al. 2021: 392):

In 2018, Books for Everyone initiated a bilingual book project, the aim of which is to increase the knowledge and production of bilingual books in Norway. The project also aims to raise awareness of language, culture and dialogue by including second language writers, translators and readers in the development of books.

Moreover, the needs of different readers are addressed by raising writers' awareness of their text accessibility and is enhanced by technological tools in Belgium, as observed by Vendeghinste (2021: 62):

The Francophone community, also known as the Fédération Wallon Bruxelles, through its digital administration service (eWBS – Wallonia Brussels Simplification), offers awareness-raising activities. Writers can also ask to have a text, a group of documents or an entire process analysed and revised. This is done by the already mentioned organization Droits Quotidiens.

The awareness of the needs of different readers is both enabled and promoted by collecting and analysing language corpora, as noted by Vandeghinste et al. (2019: 69):

The Lire et Écrire association, together with the Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles, carries out an awareness campaign every year on a different topic (digital illiteracy for 2020, the percentage of the Belgian population who is illiterate in 2019, etc.). ...To study the properties of easy-to-read Dutch, the association collected and automatically annotated the archive of the Wablieft online newspaper and made the corpus available to researchers through the Dutch Language Institute. They are also working on making the WAI-NOT news corpus, i.e., the collection of all news items that have appeared on the WAI-NOT website, available for research. This corpus contains even shorter and easier to read sentences than the Wablieft corpus.

Therefore, it is also important to recognise the different needs of target audiences and to offer accessible solutions to writers, thus creating a link between supply and demand.

4.3. Awareness of Easy Language in political, legal, and financial contexts

Once the research community, as well as readers and writers, have organised themselves around the Easy Language concept, efforts can be made to raise awareness among policymakers to secure funding for the development and utilisation of Easy Language. As Vandeghinste et al. (2021: 76) note, “[w]hile some politicians are starting to acknowledge the importance of Easy Language, for example for social workers, the biggest challenges remaining are policy awareness and funding”.

The primary physical obstacle for access to space, which society has largely acknowledged and addressed, is the lack of funding. However, access to the intellectual and emotional space facilitated by language is not as readily apparent. As Vandeghinste et al. (2021: 77) argue:

With respect to the raised awareness of accessibility, only a limited budget is available to improve accessibility for people with disabilities. Clearly visible accessibility measures, such as the accessibility of buildings for wheelchairs, often have priority over less visible measures, such as providing government documents in an Easy Language variant.

Bovim Bugge et al. (2021: 377) examine the status of Easy Language in Norway, highlighting collaboration between legal entities and digitalisation agencies to advocate for inclusion across all demographics. They prioritise text quality over end-user perspectives, recognising that both written and spoken language can inadvertently exclude individuals and impede democracy.

Marques (2019: 419) agrees that establishing a legal framework for Easy Language is crucial, particularly in Portugal. However, she contends that it is not sufficient on its own:

Although the government and other stakeholders (e.g., professionals working in the disability field, and politicians, academics...) now recognize the importance of the awareness of cognitive accessibility and the need to ensure access to relevant information for all people, a legal framework or recommendations that specifically address the need to produce information and culture in Easy Language and of scientific research on the topic are still lacking.

Considering the aforementioned points, it is evident that raising awareness of Easy Language is closely intertwined with policy and legislative changes. These changes can foster inter-structural collaboration and facilitate funding opportunities.

4.4. Awareness of the role of universities and media

In addition to recognising the necessity for Easy Language availability, universities play a crucial role in training specialists. However, this aspect is still underdeveloped and lacks a clear framework. While there are some instances of systematic training for Easy Language creators, the training mostly focuses on narrow and specific areas.

Switzerland is actively promoting awareness of the potential benefits of training the target group on text adaptation and advocating for their own needs. There is also a growing recognition among university staff of the potential of Easy Language as a research and study course topic.

Parpan-Blaser (2021: 585) emphasises the significance of media in raising public awareness of the importance of training:

In addition, most recently, Swiss national media have echoed the progressive development of Easy Language in the linguistic regions thereby raising awareness of and interest in the potential benefits of Easy Language for the target populations.

Parpan-Blaser (2021: 597) links training with awareness-raising activities:

Easy Language has been discussed in individual training courses via a few selective thematic inputs there for around 15 years – not in the form of in-depth examinations of the concept, but in the form of awareness-raising introductions to Easy Language and its objectives. Easy Language has appeared as a topic in special education, speech therapy, and social pedagogy courses, in connection with discourses on participation, empowerment, accessibility, and inclusion, which are central to these fields. Since the introduction of these courses, master's theses have been written on, for example, the simplification of texts in already-existing teaching materials and children's and young adults' books.

Another instance of preparing Easy Language specialists was the study course within the Erasmus+ project “Promoting Easy-to-Read Language for Social Inclusion”. This course aimed to equip Easy Language creators with comprehensive information about Easy Language from various perspectives and was conducted in all three member countries: Latvia, Lithuania, and Slovenia. However, it has not been continued.

There are other instances of designated Easy Language training. However, many areas still require investigation and development.

Therefore, we can infer that awareness of Easy Language begins with the recognition of a lack of awareness or unawareness, which constitutes the initial level of awareness, as researchers have acknowledged the problem and made their observations public. The subsequent step involves informing society members, which can be achieved through various means, including conducting research projects not only on public awareness but also on the features of Easy Language.

Next, it is essential to acknowledge the diverse needs of target groups and seek solutions to bridge the demand-supply gap. This can be accomplished on various levels: political, legislative, and financial, as well as by establishing effective collaborative models between organisations and providing adequate and targeted training. Moreover, it is important to note that this process cannot be directly transferred from one language to another, as languages differ; see Figure 1 below.

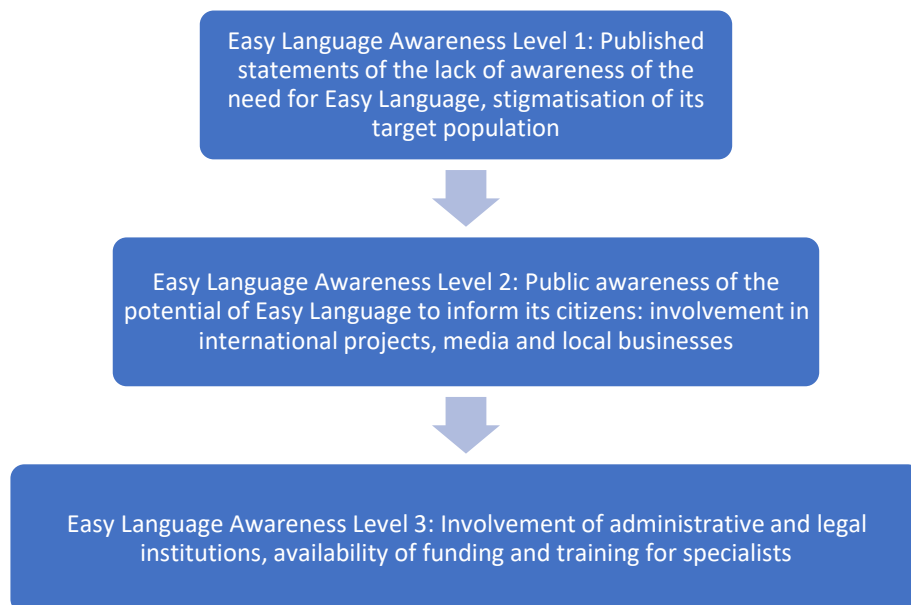


Figure 1. Levels of Easy Language awareness

Figure 1 is derived from the theoretical analysis of previous experiences in implementing Easy Language across different countries. It indicates common problems and solutions that have proven effective across various contexts. Consequently, the subsequent section of the paper will present an empirical comparison of awareness and attitudes towards Easy Language in three different countries.

5. An empirical study of changes in awareness of Easy Language from 2021 to 2022 in Latvia, Lithuania, and Slovenia

The study on Easy Language awareness was conducted in three countries over two years. While the methods and personnel remained consistent, variations in the research populations led to slight differences in the responses.

5.1. Research method

The objectives of the research were to evaluate public awareness of Easy Language and its use in the country, as well as to ascertain the target audience's perception of the benefits of Easy Language in facilitating access to information.

The target audience of the study includes society as a whole, with representative results; individuals with permanently or temporarily limited reading proficiency who have participated in the validation process of prepared materials; and field professionals who have been engaged in the validation process of prepared materials. In Latvia, eight specific target groups were identified: people with dyslexia, seniors, migrants, minorities, diaspora, individuals with mental disabilities, individuals with intellectual disabilities, and hard-of-hearing and deaf individuals.

Research tools:

1. Questionnaire for society as a whole (see Appendix).
2. A focus group interview for a small group of carefully selected participants who contribute to open discussions for research purposes.

A representative sample was carefully selected, with the public survey comprising 500 respondents to ensure sample representativeness across the entire country. This involved 1500 respondents in total, factoring in quotas for city/region, gender, and age groups. Additionally, 27 participants were included in focus groups, with 9 professionals per country across the three countries.

The research activities undertaken involved the following steps:

- (1) Adaptation of the questionnaire for the general public.
- (2) Development of focus group questions aligned with the research objectives, complementing each other for both professionals and target groups.
- (3) Identification of the target audience for focus groups.
- (4) Implementation of public questionnaires in Latvia, Lithuania, and Slovenia, including:
 - Conducting questionnaires with the target audience;
 - Facilitating focus groups for target groups;
 - Organising focus groups for professionals.

5.2. Results of the general public surveys carried out in Slovenia, Latvia and Lithuania

The survey conducted earlier, in February 2021, within the project was used for data comparison purposes. It adhered to identical implementation principles and invited respondents to complete an identical survey questionnaire (see Appendix), which included questions for the general public, target population, and professionals working with them.

5.2.1. General public awareness

The awareness of Easy Language among the general public varies across the three countries, as indicated in Table 1, which presents the results of the general public survey:

1. In **Slovenia**, respondents from the general public were asked about their awareness of Easy Language before filling out the survey. Results indicate that 48.4% (compared to 41% in 2021) had heard of it but had not used it, while 49.4% (up from 31% in 2021) had heard of it and used it. Only 2.1% (down from 25% in 2021) of the respondents had not heard of Easy Language before. The considerable difference in the percentage of respondents who were unaware of the concept could potentially be attributed to the fact that most respondents are from the Carinthia region or have local coverage, possibly being followers of the Zavod RISA Facebook page.
2. In **Lithuania**, the awareness of the Easy Language concept has increased within a year, with 39.3% of respondents indicating awareness, slightly higher than the 45% reported in 2021. Nearly 27% of respondents stated they had heard about Easy Language but had not used it, a notable increase from the 18% reported in 2021. Additionally, the number of respondents who reported knowing about Easy Language and using it has also increased. In the current survey, 21.1% of all respondents indicated they know and use Easy Language, compared to 19% in 2021.
3. In **Latvia**, the popularity of Easy Language as a concept has not significantly improved compared to 2021; in fact, recognition has decreased across all aspects. The percentage of respondents who have never heard of Easy Language has increased from 53% to 55%. This is notable because, when compared to Slovenia, this percentage is equivalent to the number of respondents who have heard of Easy Language and actively use it. Additionally, 21% of respondents have heard about Easy Language but have never used it, compared to 27% in the 2021 survey. Furthermore, only 9% of respondents have both heard about and used Easy Language, down from 11% in 2021.

Table 1. Comparison of Easy Language awareness among the general public in the three countries in 2021 and 2022

	Slovenia 2021	Slovenia 2022	Lithuania 2021	Lithuania 2022	Latvia 2021	Latvia 2022	Average 2021	Average 2022
Heard of but not used	41%	48.4%	18%	26.9%	27%	21%	29%	32.1%
Heard of and used	31%	49.4%	19%	21.1%	11%	9%	20%	26.5%
Never heard of	25%	2.1%	45%	39.3%	53%	55%	41%	31.1%

5.2.2. Difficulties comprehending information and types of difficult information

Slovenia: Around 25% of respondents indicated they never experienced difficulties comprehending essential information. However, three-quarters of respondents encountered this difficulty occasionally or frequently. The results in 2021 showed a similar trend, with fewer respondents indicating they always understood the information.

Lithuania: A notable portion of respondents reported encountering challenges in understanding complex texts. Specifically, 68.3% of individuals indicated they sometimes experience such difficulties, while 11.7% reported facing them frequently. Conversely, 15.2% of respondents claimed they have never encountered challenges comprehending relevant information. These findings closely mirror those of the 2021 survey, with a notable difference observed only in the group of respondents who stated they have never experienced difficulties comprehending relevant information. In 2021, this option was chosen by 12% of all respondents.

Latvia: When asked if they ever felt the need for Easy Language when dealing with complexly written information, a total of 87% of respondents acknowledged such a need. Among them, 19% encounter such situations frequently, while 68% do so occasionally. Compared to the 2021 survey, the total number of respondents expressing this need has increased by 2%, with the most significant increase, 4%, observed among those who often require Easy Language.

Similarly to the 2021 survey across all three countries, governmental information remains the most challenging for most respondents to understand, followed by documents created by specialists. Consequently, in response to the question of whether governmental institutions should always communicate with the public in Easy Language, the vast majority of respondents strongly agree (LT – 65%, LV – 47%, SLO – 53.8%). While comparing the data from surveys conducted in 2021 and 2022 reveals no major changes, there is a clearly visible trend indicating that people increasingly feel the need for information prepared in Easy Language.

5.2.3. Strategies for alleviating communication difficulties

Slovenia: Similarly to 2021, the majority of respondents (63.4% in 2022) used internet search engines to seek clarifying information, followed by seeking assistance from others. Only a small portion of respondents (9.4%) indicated that they would contact or email a specialist regarding the issue.

Lithuania: When faced with difficulties understanding information, respondents employ a variety of strategies. The largest percentage opted to look up information using a search engine and to contact a specialist – these choices accounted for 20.7% of all responses. The other three options – seeking explanations on a webpage, consulting friends, and asking family members – garnered similar responses,

ranging between 16.9% and 13.2%. Writing an email to a specialist was the least preferred choice, with less than 10% selecting this option. The data from the 2021 survey is comparable, with the exception of the response “Called a specialist able to consult me”. In 2021, this option was chosen by 15% of all respondents, while in 2022, it, along with the answer “Looked it up using a search engine”, was the most popular (amounting to 20.7% of all responses).

Latvia: When confronted with complex or incomprehensible information, the most common approach is to search for the necessary information on search engines such as Google. However, compared to 2021, 4% fewer respondents (44%) opted to search for information on the internet. Conversely, the number of respondents who, unable to grasp the information they need, consult a specialist has increased by 1%. In 2021, 33% of respondents chose this option, compared to 34% in 2022. Almost as frequently, respondents searched for information on the websites of state institutions or sought assistance from a family member.

Surveys from both years indicate that when encountering difficult-to-understand information, people predominantly rely on internet search options. This underscores the importance of providing crucial information in Easy Language on websites.

5.3. Assessment of general public attitudes

The survey encompassed questions aimed at gauging respondents’ assessments of four different statements. Utilising a 5-level scale of responses ranging from uncertain (0) to strongly agree (4), the following observations were made:

1. **Slovenia:** 45.5% of respondents expressed agreement that they would feel self-conscious if placed in a situation where they found it challenging to understand texts. Moreover, a significant majority (62.9% agree) indicated they would greatly welcome information specifically tailored in Easy Language.
2. **Lithuania:** A majority of respondents expressed a preference for having information tailored for them in Easy Language, with 39.3% strongly agreeing and 33.3% agreeing. Notably, 12% expressed no preference, while a combined percentage of 15.4% disagreed or strongly disagreed. The current survey data closely mirrors that of the 2021 survey.
3. **Latvia:** 68% of respondents acknowledged that they would appreciate if information were prepared for their needs in Easy Language, representing a 3% increase compared to 2021.

In the digital era, it is feasible to deliver targeted content to each reader, taking into account the diverse needs of the target audience and providing tools to facilitate comprehension while minimising the time spent deciphering the core message. This sentiment is echoed in the surveys, where the vast majority of the general public expressed a positive inclination towards receiving tailored information in Easy Language.

5.4. Enhancement of Easy Language awareness across Latvia, Lithuania, and Slovenia

A section of the survey aimed to gather information regarding the comprehension and identification of key elements of Easy Language. These elements included assessing the complexity of words, the format of communication, considerations on whether the message should remain unchanged, potential loss of relevant details and themes during translation, construction of text and illustrations, and the necessity of end-user validation when transitioning to Easy Language.

Slovenia: The survey queried respondents on whether they believed they acquired a better understanding of Easy Language through the survey. As depicted in Figure 2 for Slovenia, 33% of respondents reported having gained improved knowledge of Easy Language through the survey (a slight increase from 30% in 2021). Conversely, 27% disagreed (compared to almost 25% in 2021). Nearly 31% (an increase from 25% in 2021) of respondents recalled having previously used Easy Language, while the remainder expressed uncertainty.

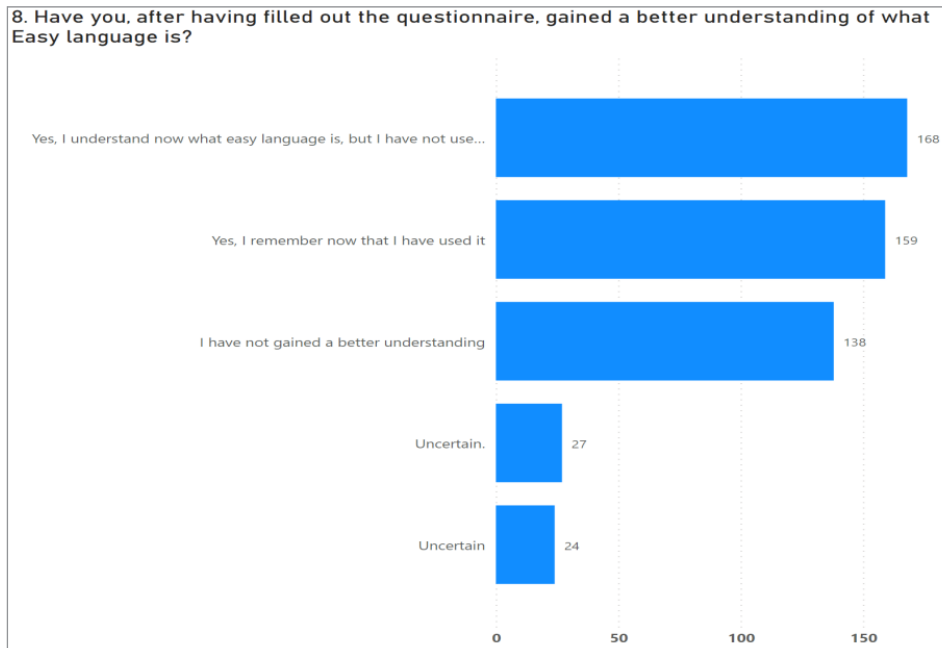


Figure 2. Awareness of Easy Language in Slovenia after filling in the questionnaire

Lithuania: Figure 3 shows that more than two thirds of respondents feel positive about their understanding of Easy Language. The most significant percentage, 30.6%, felt that they had gained a better understanding of what Easy language is and even remembered having used it before, followed closely by those who had an idea of what Easy Language is but were not quite sure (29.3%) and those who were sure what Easy Language is but had not used it. In comparison, only a tiny percentage of 8.9% felt that the survey had not improved their understanding of Easy Language. Looking at the results, it can be said that most people have gained a better understanding of Easy Language after completing this survey. The data from this survey do not show any significant differences compared to the data from 2021.

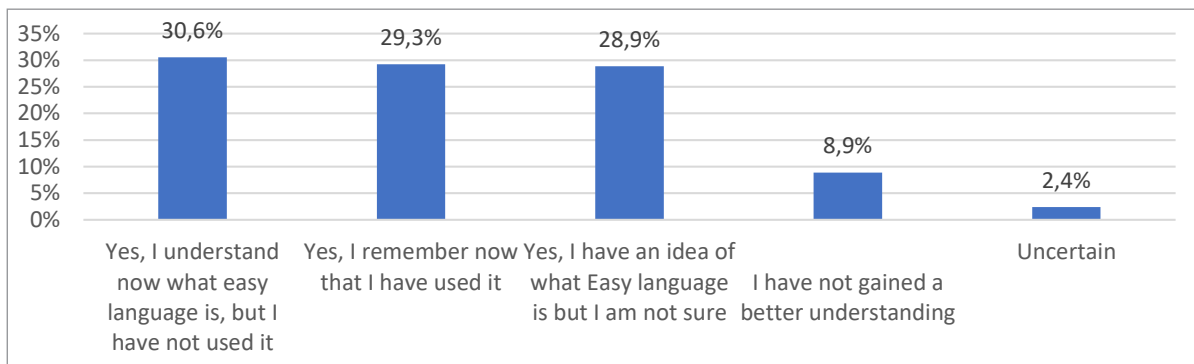


Figure 3. Awareness of Easy Language in Lithuania after filling in the questionnaire

Latvia: In the 2022 repeat study, 30% of Latvian respondents had encountered the concept of Easy Language. Compared to the results of the 2021 study, there are more people who initially found it “difficult to say” or who had encountered Easy Language. At the end of the survey, 45% of the sample remembered the concept of Easy Language, while 36% said they had a rough idea of Easy Language as a result of the survey. A similar split of responses was observed in the 2021 study.

This part of the survey shows that there is no significant improvement in understanding the concept and recognising Easy Language in Latvia and Lithuania, but there are better results in Slovenia.

Thus, the results of the survey for the general public show that Latvia and Lithuania might still be in the first phase of Easy Language awareness, i.e. the researchers have recognised the lack of awareness of Easy Language in the general public. The Slovenian survey shows slightly better results, so it could be that the Slovenian society is already in the next stages of implementing Easy Language in its practice and legislation.

6. Results of the focus group discussions

In addition to the general public survey, focus group meetings were held in each of the three countries. The focus groups were made up of professionals who work with target groups, and the aim of the focus group meetings was to clarify the most important aspects of the Easy Language situation in each country.

The main conclusions of the focus group meetings are presented below.

6.1. Latvia

Nine professionals working with Easy Language users participated in the focus group.

The focus group meeting took place on 27 May 2022. Topics discussed included the need for tailored information, the specificities of different target groups, and Easy Language awareness among professionals working with the target groups.

- **The need for tailored information, including in Easy Language, when working with target groups**

All focus group participants agreed that their experience of working with target groups demonstrated the need for Easy Language, because people with perception difficulties need to be able to receive information that they can understand. However, each focus group participant highlighted the particularities of their respective target group. For instance, individuals with psychosocial disorders may have various diagnoses, including those with higher education. Nevertheless, Easy Language remains essential in specific scenarios, such as when receiving correspondence from housing authorities, visiting the bank, or consulting with a doctor. In such cases, people with psychosocial disorders turn to relatives or carers to help them understand the information that is important to them. These are the moments when professionals working with target groups become “interpreters” for their clients in communicating with the public.

- **The specificity of the target group of deaf people is related to time**

One of the participants in the focus group admitted: “Many people need Easy Language, but they do not realise it themselves, nor do they admit it. The fact that these people have not understood the text can only be revealed by asking questions about what they have heard/read.”

All the focus group participants were aware of the need for Easy Language when working with their target groups. As one of the focus group participants concluded: “We don’t choose Easy Language artificially - it is the need of our people.” Most of the focus group participants mentioned social services, medical services, legal information, information on tax issues (SRS EDS) as particularly important areas requiring information in Easy Language.

All focus group participants also agreed that Easy Language is needed for both written information and oral communication, where speed of speech is also important, along with vocabulary and simple grammatical forms.

- **Awareness of Easy Language and its basic principles among professionals working with target groups**

As the focus group discussions showed, all professionals rely mainly on their experience and intuition when working with target groups, because the basic principles of Easy Language are used unconsciously. The knowledge gained in practice about the target group and its specific needs helps them to create successful communication. Therefore, most of the time professionals are satisfied with their experience-based skills and do not even look for additional information about Easy Language and the possibilities of using it in working with their target group.

- **Easy Language as a transition**

During the focus group discussions, it became clear that the deaf community most often uses Easy Language as a transition to sign language, where the number of signs is limited, and complex information needs to be simplified. As the focus group participant – a sign language interpreter – admitted, he and his colleagues use Easy Language all the time, not realising that Easy Language is a means of communication based on a certain methodology but thinking about how to make information as understandable as possible for their target group.

A representative of the Latvian stroke association “Vigor” admitted that she had experienced a stroke herself, which helped her to better understand the needs of the association’s members. However, she lacks the theory-based knowledge to recognise the need for Easy Language not only through the prism of her own experience but also professionally, by assessing the individual needs of each person.

6.2. Lithuania

Nine professionals working with different target groups were interviewed. The focus group was held on June 4, 2022. The main findings of the discussion were grouped into four themes:

- **Easy and Plain Languages as the basis**

Legal information should be provided in Easy Language first. People take out quick loans very easily, leading to bailiffs issuing complicated texts. Services and responsibilities need to be described in Easy Language. Perhaps the Ministry of Social Security and Labour should centralise all legal information instead of disseminating it across various publications. Day-care centres also need information in Easy Language. Information about public services, such as banks and telecommunications, is very important.

- **The discrepancy between recognising the necessity and implementing Easy Language**

While most respondents believe that their colleagues acknowledge the benefits of Easy Language, they also note that some individuals in their field lack the knowledge or time to actively engage with it.

One respondent remarked: “My colleagues understand that it is necessary. However, when you talk to other professionals, you find that not all of them see the point of Easy Language. In the center where I work, people discuss Easy Language primarily as a means for individuals with intellectual disabilities to express themselves.” Additionally, staff members have observed that the Ministry of Social Security and Labour is familiar with the term ‘Easy Language’ and considers it a priority. However, they also observe that despite understanding the importance of Easy Language, individuals working in the ministry struggle to allocate sufficient time to address it.

- **Awareness among professionals**

Professionals working with Easy Language target groups recognise the necessity of shifting societal mindsets; however, some experts in the field question the utility of Easy Language. They argue that individuals accustomed to reading traditional information may be deterred if Easy Language is adopted. Thus, there is a pressing need to heighten awareness of Easy Language.

Additionally, cultural institutions express a desire to integrate individuals with intellectual disabilities into cultural life. However, they often lack familiarity with spoken Easy Language and struggle to effectively communicate with this demographic.

6.3. Slovenia

Nine professionals met online (Microsoft Teams) on 7 June 2022, to discuss the following questions:

- **Easy Language as a bridge to everyday activities**

The members expressed that the need for Easy Language is generally profound. In schools, textbooks and teaching materials should be in Easy Language; for adults from all target groups, forms and instructions, news, health information and information about rights and responsibilities, for example, should be in Easy Language (all information needed in everyday life).

- **The need for Easy Language in the political sphere**

In Slovenia, not all people with intellectual disabilities (or mental health problems) can vote because the authorities believe they are not capable of understanding what the elections are about. One of the problems is that the information is difficult to understand. The focus group confirms this and expresses that different ministries (the Ministry of Labour, Family, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities; the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport; the Ministry of Culture; the Ministry of Public Administration and the Ministry of Health are mentioned) should take up this task and order the production of information in Easy Language and provide resources for the administration and other organisations to do so.

- **Awareness and implementation**

In general, awareness has increased in the last 2–3 years, but the motivation to learn the principles and implementation of Easy Language depends on the individual. None of the workplaces where the focus group members come from have explicit instructions from their superiors to develop, produce and use information in Easy Language. The receptiveness of the organisation’s management to Easy Language varies, as does the receptiveness of each individual employee. Typically, within organisations, pairs or small groups of motivated individuals meet and work on the issue.

Focus group meetings show that professionals working with Easy Language target groups are more aware of the Easy Language concept, understand the differences between different target groups and can offer different solutions to improve the overall situation. This means that professionals in the field have reached a higher level of Easy Language awareness than the general public, and this is another gap to be filled in the future.

7. Conclusions

Although the concept of Easy Language awareness itself is being used more and more, creating a misconception of its self-evident understanding, there are still many aspects that show its complexity and multidimensionality.

Firstly, awareness of Easy Language spans various levels, ranging from recognising the absence of awareness to informing society members and acknowledging the diverse needs of target groups. Additionally, it entails proposing diverse solutions to bridge the gap between demand and supply. Secondly, comprehension of the concept of Easy Language Awareness and the benefits it can provide varies among policymakers, Easy Language creators, users, and individuals who offer everyday support to those in need.

It is important for each member of society to be aware of their role in creating an accessible information environment: awareness of Easy Language is just as important between authorities and universities as it is within the target groups themselves – each provides different but equally important impulses for the development of Easy Language.

Comparing the research data from these two years in Latvia, Lithuania, and Slovenia, no significant changes have been observed in the awareness and use of Easy Language. However, some positive developments have emerged. There's an increased public awareness that Easy Language can benefit every member of society. Additionally, in Latvia, more individuals with higher education acknowledge their difficulty in comprehending complex written information, while those with secondary and professional education exhibit greater interest in Easy Language-related activities. Considering the research sample, it can be concluded that the data correspond to the real situation and can be used in the development of future strategies for increasing the recognition of Easy Language in society.

The research results highlight a disparity in awareness between the general public and professionals in the field. While the former exhibit minimal awareness of Easy Language, the latter have ascended to higher levels of awareness. Thus, both theoretical and empirical analyses of the Easy Language situation across different countries underscore the interconnectedness of awareness and attitudes within various societal groups. Furthermore, implementing any change in this regard is a time-consuming process.

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Submitted May 2023
Accepted February 2024

Appendix: Questionnaire on Easy language awareness in Latvia, Lithuania and Slovenia

Thank you for your interest in completing the questionnaire on information accessibility and Easy language as a means of delivering demanding information that is understood by everyone. The study aims at assessing public opinion on recognisability and possible daily use of Easy language. The questionnaire is anonymous and will take only up to 5 minutes of your time. Thank you!

1. Have you previously heard of/encountered Easy language?

1. Yes, I have heard of it and I have used it
2. Yes, I have heard of it, but have not used it
3. No, I have not heard of it
4. Uncertain

2. Easy language aims at making complex information understandable. Who could, in your opinion, benefit from information in Easy language?

Multiple answers are allowed

1. Every member of the society
2. Seniors, the elderly
3. Immigrants from other countries
4. Latvians with non-Latvian/Lithuanian/Slovenian permanent residence outside of Latvia/Lithuania/Slovenia
5. National minorities in Latvia/Lithuania/Slovenia
6. People with mental disorders
7. People with intellectual disabilities
8. People with hearing impairments
9. People with dyslexia (difficulties to comprehend written text)
10. People with autism-spectrum disorders
11. People who suffered brain injury or stroke
12. Other societal groups (please specify)

13. Uncertain

3. Have you personally experienced difficulties to comprehend relevant information due to the text being composed in a complex manner?

1. Yes, often
2. Yes, sometimes
3. No, never
4. Uncertain

Question 4 is for those who gave answers 1 and 2 in question 3.

4. What type of information have you had difficulties to comprehend?

Multiple answers are allowed

1. A letter from a governmental institution
2. Governmental institution webpage content
3. Information on eligibility to receive a service
4. Safety regulations
5. A document created by a specialist (i.e. doctor, legal statement etc.)
6. Other type of information; please specify _____
7. Uncertain/cannot remember

Question 5 is for those who gave answers 1, 2, 3 and 5 in question 4.

5. How did you act when having difficulties to comprehend a written text?

Several answers are allowed

1. Called a specialist able to consult me (e.g., customer service centre)
2. Wrote an e-mail to a specialist asking to elaborate
3. Searched for an explanation in the webpage of the institution
4. Looked it up using a search engine
5. Asked family members for help
6. Asked friends, acquaintances for help
7. Took different action; please specify _____
8. Cannot remember

6. Please evaluate, on a scale from 1 to 4, how strongly you agree with the following statements on typical situations and communication with governmental institutions. If you do not agree at all, choose 1 and, if agree fully, choose 4.

	1 – Strongly disagree	2 – Disagree	3 – Agree	4 – Strongly agree	Uncertain
Governmental institutions should always communicate with the public in easy language	1	2	3	4	99
Situations when I find it difficult to understand a text make me feel Self-conscious.	1	2	3	4	99
I would feel uncomfortable knowing that information is specifically tailored for me in easy language	1	2	3	4	99
I would be glad if information would be specifically tailored for me in easy language	1	2	3	4	99

7. How do you think the information in Easy language is prepared? Please mark all actions that you believe are taken.

	1 – Strongly disagree	2 – Disagree	3 – Agree	4 – Strongly agree	Uncertain
Easy language is the same text with complex words omitted	1	2	3	4	99
Easy language is a specific form of communication that follows specific guidelines	1	2	3	4	99
Writing a text in Easy language does not change the message of the text	1	2	3	4	99
When changing a text to Easy language, relevant details and themes of the text might be lost	1	2	3	4	99
Information in Easy language must be checked/ validated by the end-users.					
Text in Easy language often has pictures added to it.					

8. **Have you, after having filled out the questionnaire, gained a better understanding of what Easy language is?**
1. Yes, I remember now that I have used it
 2. Yes, I understand now what easy language is, but I have not used it
 3. Yes, I have an idea of what Easy language is but I am not sure
 4. I have not gained a better understanding
 5. Uncertain

Now we will follow up with some questions about you.

10. Please specify your gender

1. female
2. male

11. Please specify your age

(full years):

12. Please specify the region of Latvia/Lithuania/Slovenia you live in

1. Kurzeme
2. Zemgale
3. Latgale
4. Vidzeme
5. Rīga
6. Pierīga (up to 50 km from Riga)

13. Please specify the type of a habitable territory you live in

1. Large city (Daugavpils, Jelgava, Jēkabpils, Liepāja, Rēzekne, Valmiera and Ventspils)
2. Another city
3. Village and/or countryside area

14. Please specify your education level (highest completed education level)

1. Basic education or lower
2. General secondary or vocational secondary education
3. Higher education

15. Please specify your nationality

1. Latvian
2. Russian
3. Other (please specify) _____

17. Please specify your occupation

1. Wage labour
2. Entrepreneur, proprietor
3. Self-employed or freelancer
4. Assist in a family business
5. Short-term engagements
6. On a maternal/paternal leave
7. Stay-at-home spouse
8. Unemployed
9. Pensioner (any group)
10. Student
11. Other (please specify) _____