

Easy language for social inclusion: case study

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Abstract. The research is devised as a case study focused on the study course “Easy Language for Social Inclusion” developed within the ERASMUS+ project “Promoting Easy-to-Read Language for Social Inclusion/PERLSI”. The discussion is contextualized within a broader discourse on the training opportunities available for translators in the project countries (Latvia, Lithuania, and Slovenia). The macro-level of analysis introduces the socio-political frame of discourse on inclusion and information accessibility. The meso-level discussion evolves around the Easy language translator’s profile, based on the best practice offered by German scholars (Maaß and Rink 2020) and the immediate experience acquired during the project. Micro-level analysis offers insights into the course syllabus, the study materials developed to ensure the acquisition of knowledge, skills, and competencies necessary for reducing cognitive load at lexical, syntactic, and textual levels as well as the visual language of the text.

Keywords: *intralingual translation, Easy language, information accessibility, Easy language translator profile, cognitive load reduction*

Lengvai suprantama kalba socialinei įtraukčiai – atvejo aprašymas

Santrauka. Straipsnis „Lengvai suprantama kalba socialinei įtraukčiai – atvejo aprašymas“ sukurtas kaip atvejo analizė, kurios centre yra studijų kursas „Lengvai suprantama kalba socialinei įtraukčiai“. Kursas parengtas pagal ERASMUS+ projektą „Lengvai suprantamos kalbos skatinimas socialinei įtraukčiai“. Diskusijos kontekstas sukurtas platesniame diskurse apžvelgiant intralingvistinio vertimo mokymo galimybes vertėjams projekto valstybėse (Latvijoje, Lietuvoje, Slovėnijoje). Darbo tikslas yra retrospektyviai įvertinti kurso kokybę atsižvelgiant į tai, kad jis buvo parengtas siekiant pasiūlyti visapusišką įtraukiančios visuo-
menės, prieinamos informacijos bei lengvai suprantamos kalbos koncepcijų įvadą ir tokiu būdu ugdyti intralingvistinio vertimo sugebėjimus, reikalingus kognityviniam krūviui tiksliniame tekste mažinti. Atitinkamai analizės **makrolygmeniu** atskleidžiamas įtraukimo ir informacijos prieinamumo diskurso socio-politinis rėmas bei lengvai suprantamos kalbos galutinių vartotojų svarba nustatant vertimo strategijas ir vertinant atliktus vertimus. Diskusijos **viduriniu lygmeniu** apžvelgiamas vokiečių akademikų siūlomas

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lengvai suprantamos kalbos vertėjo profilis (Maaß and Rink 2020) ir per minėtą projektą įgyta tiesioginė patirtis. **Mikrolygmens** analizė siūlo susipažinti su kurso planu ir mokomąja medžiaga, kuri sukurta taip, kad teiktų žinių, įgūdžių ir sugebėjimų, reikalingų kognityviniam krūviui mažinti leksiniu, sintaksiniu ir teksto rengimo lygmeniu bei teksto vizualiniam įforminimui. Kurso pabaigoje atliktos apklausos analizė leidžia tyrinėti galimybes skatinti lengvai suprantamos kalbos vertėjo profilio suvokimą ir atpažįstamumą. Numatyta, kad kursas tobulins žurnalistų, socialinių darbuotojų, mokytojų, vertėjų ir ryšių su visuomene specialistų darbą.

Esminiai žodžiai: *intralingvistinis vertimas, lengvai suprantama kalba, informacijos prieinamumas, lengvai suprantamos kalbos vertėjo profilis, kognityvinio krūvio mažinimas*

Introduction

The present research has a three-fold aim. The macro-level analysis aims at introducing the socio-political discourse framework on inclusion and information accessibility. The meso-level focuses on outlining the Easy language translator's profile, drawing on best practices from German scholars (Maaß and Rink 2020) and immediate project experience. The micro-level analysis aims at assessing the PERLSI project Easy language course syllabus. The research design adopts a case study methodology, treating the newly developed Easy language study course as a case. Each subsequent level of analysis zooms in on the experience in the area of Easy language in the PERLSI project counties.

The three-level analysis defines the outline of the paper. Section 1 introduces the socio-political framework. Sections 2 and 3 address the purposes of the meso-level discussion and contextualise a provisional outline of the Easy language translator's profile within a broader discourse on the training opportunities available for translators in the project countries, thus preparing for the reflections on the newly developed Easy language study course in the same countries, as deliberated in Section 4. The end-of-course survey is chosen as a data collection tool for the assessment of the knowledge, skills, and competencies provided by the newly developed Easy language study course "Easy Language for Social Inclusion".

1. Socio-political frame of discourse on inclusion and information accessibility

Recognizing the diversity within society comes hand in hand with addressing the needs of each individual. Awareness of diverse needs, requirements, and human rights for different target groups has increased, as evidenced by the growing number of laws, regulations, and declarations worldwide. This trend extends from The Chronically Sick and Disabled Persons Act (1970) in the UK to the UN Declaration on the Rights of Disabled Persons (1975), and further to the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD, 2006), ratified by 163 countries. Additionally, the European Accessibility Act (2019) reflects ongoing efforts in this direction.

The latter two documents explicitly declare the rights to accessible information, and this is often relinquished in environmental accessibility. Nevertheless, inclusion, which is defined as "the idea that everyone should be able to use the same facilities, take part in the same activities, and enjoy the same experiences, including people who have a disability or other disadvantage" (Cambridge Dictionary), cannot be fully implemented without ensuring information accessibility.

Web Content Accessibility Guidelines highlight four aspects of information accessibility: the web content should be perceivable, operable, understandable, and robust (WCAG). People with perceptual

disorders may encounter difficulties in each of the above-mentioned (Maaß 2020: 22); Easy and plain language are important tools in providing understandable content for each person in need. As Maaß observes, “[t]his is not a question of user deficits, but rather of the textual qualities that are required in order to grant access: If users cannot perceive and understand a text offer, it is the text that does not meet their requirements.” (ibid.)

With legislative changes and a deeper understanding of the importance of accessible information, the demand is expected to increase. It is crucial to highlight Easy language as an important means of achieving information accessibility. As Knapp and Haramija point out, “[a]ccording to the academic perspective, Easy Language is a process and method of communication that promotes the development of literacy and social and psychological integration of people with reading and writing difficulties. Communication is adapted in a way that the content is made readable and understandable. [...] The simpler definition, aimed towards the general public and end users, states that Easy language is information that is easy to find, easy to read, and easy to understand.” (2021: 472).

Although there are several remarkable examples of introducing Easy language training in higher education curricula, e.g., in Spain, Portugal, Germany, and Switzerland (Simon 2022: 463), the demand-supply ratio might be unbalanced. Moreover, Easy language is language-specific; therefore, each country should offer training possibilities for Easy language text creators.

Considering the mentioned, there was a study course developed within the ERASMUS+ project “Promoting Easy-to-Read Language for Social Inclusion” (PERLSI) as one of the intellectual outputs in the three project countries: Slovenia, Lithuania, and Latvia. The course was designed to offer a comprehensive introduction to the concepts of an inclusive society, accessible information, and Easy language, and as such aimed at developing intralingual translation competence required for the reduction of cognitive load in the target texts.

2. Easy language training opportunities in the project countries

The history and development of Easy language differ from country to country, and so do training opportunities. It is clear that education about Easy language and Easy language training is necessary; however, in the project countries, the education development also varies. As a common trait in the three project countries, the course developed within the PERLSI project was the first comprehensive study course on Easy language freely available for all interested persons.

2.1. Slovenia

The very first publications in Easy Slovenian were created in the early 2000s; however, there were separate, rare, and rather individual initiatives with no successors. There is no data on any organizations in Slovenia responsible for the production of the texts in Easy Slovenian until 2011 when the RISA Institute was founded (Knapp, Haramija 2021: 468–469). Although in 2013 *Inclusion Europe* guidelines were adapted for Slovenia, it took another five years to initiate the development of a two-volume manual and guidelines with basic methods, a model of Easy language systematization, and a training curriculum (ibid: 470–471). During the PERLSI project, the existing guidelines were complemented.

Since the 2019/2020 academic year, the University of Maribor offers an elective course on Easy language. The course, worth 4 ECTS is available to Master students at the Faculty of Education, specifically within the study programme “Inclusion in Education” (Univerza v Mariboru; Knapp, Haramija

2021: 471). The course aims to train students to master the rules regarding design and content adjustments for creating texts in Easy language. After completing the course, students should be able to find appropriate illustrations and independently prepare texts in Easy language (Univerza v Mariboru).

The RISA Institute offers consultations and different training opportunities for people with intellectual disabilities and actively participates in various projects developing new training solutions in Easy Slovenian (Liepa, Polinska 2022; Zavod RISA).

2.2. Lithuania

The first Easy Language initiatives in Lithuania started in the early 2000s, and their number is slowly increasing. However, there is no state body responsible for information accessibility, and individual initiatives have not been sufficient yet to develop a strong Easy Lithuanian tradition (Šumskiene, Baltrūnaite 2021; Bružaite-Liseckiene et al. 2021).

In 2009, *Inclusion Europe* guidelines were adapted to Lithuanian, and in 2016 Ulla Bohman's publication "Easy Reading. Information about writing texts in Easy Reading" was translated into Lithuanian (Šumskiene, Baltrūnaite 2021: 329, 333). The guidelines developed within the PERLSI project are the first step-by-step material tailored specifically for the Lithuanian language. Likewise, the course developed within the project seems to be the first training opportunity for Easy Lithuanian text creators.

2.3. Latvia

The Easy language concept was first brought to Latvia in the mid-1990s, and soon after the Easy Language Agency (*Vieglās valodas aģentūra*), a non-governmental organization promoting Easy Latvian, was founded (Liepa 2022: 35). Nevertheless, there are still only a few publications in Easy Latvian, mainly published in the early 2000s (Anča, Meļņika 2021: 315).

The *Inclusion Europe* guidelines were adapted also for Latvian between 2007 and 2009. However, the first language-specific guidelines were created within the PERLSI project.

Easy Language Agency has been offering short training for Easy language text creators; however, considering the comprehensiveness of the training, one should note the scarce academic research in this field in Latvia (Anča, Meļņika 2021: 319). The course developed within the PERLSI project laid the foundation for further education, and shortly afterward, two universities in Latvia began offering Easy Language as an elective course.

3. Easy language translator's profile

When working on the Easy language course syllabus, the course developers paid particular attention to the learning outcomes in terms of knowledge, skills, and competencies needed for future experts. The learning outcomes were considered in terms of the occupational standard to be developed for Easy language translators. German scholar Christiane Maaß has elaborated on the competencies and knowledge needed for the Easy language translator, drawing on the findings of the PACTE group, as well as Pöchhacker and Schulz et al. (Maaß 2020; Pöchhacker 2016; Schulz et al. 2020). These are:

- **expert domain and expert language competence** – the translator should fully comprehend the source in order to create an accurate and functional target text;

- **comprehensive knowledge of Easy language**, which also includes an understanding of potential problems and challenges, to ensure that the text adheres to the best accessibility practices;
- **knowledge of the target audience** helps the translator to apply translation methods that are the most appropriate for the readers;
- **competence to assess the target situation** or ability to adapt the text to the setting it will be used in;
- **translation and text competence** – the translator should comply with the Easy language rules and principles while bearing in mind the specific target audience as well as text peculiarities.

From here two general problems arise: first, the effort required for the creation of an Easy language text is frequently underrated (Maaß 2020: 173). Second, people seeking to learn Easy language translation often lack sufficient linguistic training, making it more challenging to acquire expert domain knowledge and expert language competence or the competence to assess the target situation in a short period of time (Simon et al 2022: 463). On the other hand, classically trained translators rarely have sufficient knowledge of the target audience, which might also pose additional challenges in certain circumstances.

Considering the abovementioned, the course developers decided to base the study course on three sets of learning outcomes:

- 1) specific **knowledge** in the field: understanding the concept of an inclusive society, knowing the basic principles of Easy language and the difference across its levels, knowing the Easy language target audiences, and understanding the validation process;
- 2) **skills** to create easy-to-understand texts and to find appropriate images for easy-to-understand texts; and
- 3) **competencies**: abilities to choose appropriate formatting, images, lexis, and structures for texts in Easy language, and to select and apply appropriate adaptation and text-writing solutions.

Thus, the study course aimed to provide adequate training for Easy language translators according to German scholars.

4. Study course “Easy Language for Social Inclusion”

4.1. Course description and students’ profile

The course in the three project countries was designed as an online course on a commonly used platform: Moodle, MS Teams, or Zoom. The course consisted of pre-recorded video lectures, seminars, and students’ independent work. The educators were available via e-mail, and the students also received handouts. Thus, the teaching methods corresponded with the best remote teaching practices suggesting using a synchronous-asynchronous mix as well as providing an opportunity for peer interactions within the seminars and timely feedback (Education Endowment Foundation 2020).

The course was structured using a top-down approach. First, the students were introduced to the concepts of an inclusive society and information accessibility as well as Easy language in international and national contexts. Then the students were led step-by-step through the basic principles of textuality in Easy language, reduction of the cognitive load at the lexical level, reduction of the cognitive load at the syntactic level, visual modalities of the Easy language text, and finally – received details about the validation process in the target group. These lectures preceded practical seminars. A short self-test on the topic followed each pre-recorded lecture. To complete the study course, the attendees were expected to prepare an intralingual translation of a text of approximately 1000 words into Easy language.

94 students took the course: 47 in Slovenia, 27 in Lithuania, and 22 in Latvia. After the course, all of them were asked to fill out a survey containing 35 closed and 5 open questions, which helped not only describe the students' profile but also served as a self-assessment of the skills, knowledge, and competencies acquired during the course.

Students' occupations were very diverse: 31% of all students were social workers and almost a third worked in science and education, 16% represented culture and arts, 12% represented public administration, and there were also a few students, public relations specialists, and customer service specialists. In Lithuania, the majority of the students were social workers, in Latvia, those working in education and science, whereas in Slovenia, both mentioned groups were represented similarly. It is noteworthy that 100% of students in the three countries were female. The reason for entering the course for Slovenian and Lithuanian students was direct work with the target group, whereas Latvian students mostly wanted to improve their knowledge.

4.2. Evaluation of acquired knowledge, competencies, and skills

Three sets of questions in the survey were devised to evaluate knowledge, competencies, and skills acquired during the course "Easy Language for Social Inclusion". In the first set, all students either strongly agreed or rather agreed that they understand the concept of an inclusive society, comprehend the basic principles of EL, know the difference across the levels of EL, know the target audiences of EL, and are capable of characterizing the validation process. Students felt most confident about understanding the concept of an inclusive society and knowing the target audiences, whereas different EL levels and the validation process were challenging.

Table 1. Learning outcomes: knowledge

	Rather agree	Strongly agree
Understand the concept of an inclusive society	Latvia: 14% Slovenia: 4% Lithuania: 16%	Latvia: 86% Slovenia: 96% Lithuania: 84%
Understand the basic principles of Easy language	Latvia: 9% Slovenia: 11% Lithuania: 24%	Latvia: 91% Slovenia: 89% Lithuania: 76%
Know the difference across the levels of Easy language	Latvia: 32% Slovenia: 30% Lithuania: 20%	Latvia: 68% Slovenia: 70% Lithuania: 80%
Know the target audiences of Easy language	Latvia: 9% Slovenia: 19% Lithuania: 8%	Latvia: 91% Slovenia: 81% Lithuania: 92%
Characterize the validation process	Latvia: 27% Slovenia: 43% Lithuania: 20%	Latvia: 73% Slovenia: 57% Lithuania: 80%

In the second set of questions, the students evaluated the skills they had developed during the course. Again, on the scale with four grading levels (strongly agree = 4, rather agree = 3, rather disagree = 2, strongly disagree = 1), the majority of students had a high self-evaluation, either rather agreeing or strongly agreeing that during the training they acquired the necessary skills to create easy-to-understand texts and to find appropriate images. Only one Lithuanian student rather disagreed that they had acquired skills to write in Easy language.

Table 2. Learning outcomes: skills

	Latvia	Slovenia	Lithuania
Skills to create easy-to-understand texts	3.5	3.6	3.2
Skills to find appropriate images for easy-to-understand texts	3.5	3.6	3.3

The evaluation also received high scores in the third set of questions evaluating students' competencies. However, in all three countries, there were more students who disagreed that they had acquired the necessary competencies.

Table 3. Learning outcomes: competencies

	Latvia	Slovenia	Lithuania
Choose appropriate formatting for texts in EL	3.7	3.7	3.1
Choose appropriate images for texts in EL	3.6	3.5	3.4
Choose appropriate lexis in EL texts	3.6	3.4	3.2
Choose an appropriate structure in EL texts	3.7	3.5	3.2
Write appropriate syntactic structures in EL texts	3.7	3.2	3.2
Select and apply appropriate adaptation and text-writing solutions	3.6	3.3	not evaluated

However, the analysis of the final assignment – the 1000-word adaptation of the text into Easy language – does not fully align with the results of the survey. On one hand, the difference between theoretical knowledge and practical skills and competencies, as highlighted by the students themselves, is also evident in the final assignments. On the other hand, if the competencies were graded by the trainers, they would not receive as high scores as indicated by the students; several issues arose in meeting each of the six competencies outlined in Table 3.

The most common mistakes reported in all three project countries included overly long and complicated sentences, a lack of a clear text structure, and an inability to create coherence (knowledge of the target audience as well as translation and text competence). Students faced challenges in rephrasing metaphors such as *Water gives you life* and explaining or substituting scientific, specific, and complex terms or foreign words such as *balance, factor, arboretum, identity, sovereignty*, etc. Additionally, students found it demanding to determine the central message in each sentence, leading to mechanically divided structures (expert domain and expert language competence; translation and text competence). Difficulties also arose in selecting appropriate pictures (associated with competence to assess the target situation), while complying with requirements regarding text formatting proved to be the easiest to follow.

It is noteworthy that after completing the course, the level of students' social responsibility increased – the average score for the growth of social responsibility was 3.6 points in Latvia, 3.7 points in Slovenia, and 3.3 points in Lithuania. The slightly lower responsibility rate in Lithuania could be attributed to students' occupations, as the majority were social workers, who typically already possess a high level of social responsibility. Nevertheless, this is an important aspect – even if the students do not become EL text creators, their understanding of societal processes changes.

4.3. Future recommendations

In addition to self-evaluation, students had the opportunity to indicate the problems they encountered during the course and suggest improvements for future training, alongside common technical issues

experienced in all three countries during the course, students emphasized the flexibility of remote training schedules and easier access to learning materials. Notably, one Latvian student indicated that pre-recorded lectures were not accessible for people with visual impairment, as the speaker in the corner of the screen was too small to read from their lips.

A significant number of students expressed concerns about the volume of information covered in a single course, prompting consideration for dividing the course content into several blocks to provide deeper insights. This consideration aligns with students' interests for continued training, which encompassed a wide range of topics – from translating legislative texts to plagiarism issues and incorporating EL in second language acquisition.

Two areas that posed significant challenges were finding and creating appropriate illustrations and understanding the validation process – these aspects were also highlighted in the self-evaluation sections. This leads to the conclusion that, first, in addition to enhancing their language skills, Easy language specialists should undergo basic training in picture processing. Second, there is a need to strengthen collaboration with readers to gain a better understanding of text functionality and the different needs of text users.

Conclusions

Considering legislative changes explained in Section 1 of the article “Socio-political frame of discourse on inclusion and information accessibility”, demand for texts in Easy language should increase. The development of Easy language practices differs from country to country, and there is no exception in the three PERLSI project countries. The study course of the project “Promoting Easy-to-Read for Social Inclusion” was developed to cover the competencies and skills necessary for Easy language translators as outlined by German scholars (Maaß and Rink 2020). Although the study course has contributed to the EL advancement in the three project countries, the analysis of the outcomes provides significant insights for further training related to contents, specific target groups' needs, and balance between theoretical lectures and practical seminars to ensure the highest possible knowledge, skills, and competencies acquisition.

Though EL is language-specific, there are several common traits observed within the course reports. First, diversity is a key characteristic of future EL text creators, who constitute a very diverse population. As a result, educators should seek ways to provide more specific solutions for both linguistically trained students with little knowledge of EL target groups and their needs, and people working with the target groups but lacking appropriate linguistic knowledge. Moreover, EL target groups exhibit diverse needs, suggesting that educators might consider incorporating target group-specific knowledge into their teaching.

Second, there is a noted lack of collaboration between text creators and text users. This encumbers the acquisition of the knowledge, skills, and competencies by the former and hinders the growth of demand by the latter, as text users may be unaware of such a service. Involving text users in the validation process ensures their active involvement, strengthens group identity, often improves the target group's reading skills, and, finally, helps translators in forming their comprehension and assumptions about the target groups (Maaß 2020: 136; Knapp 2022: 141).

Third, students tend to evaluate themselves more positively than their academic achievements during the course would suggest, indicating that Easy Language awareness is not yet sufficiently developed.

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