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VALIDATION OF EASY LANGUAGE INFORMATION: QUALITY INSURANCE OF THE PROCESS AND THE RESULT

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INTRODUCTION

As accessible information, including information in Easy language, is becoming an increasingly important issue all over Europe (Lindholm and Vanhatalo, 2021), the questions of quality insurance of the process and the results arise more frequently.

There is not a lot of studies that focus on this topic. According to Maass, in Easy and Plain language translation[1], two fundamentally different methods are in use. Assessment (or validation) of the production process involves different job roles than the assessment of the product - the translated (or adapted) text. When assessing the product, single text or a text practice can be assessed (Maass, 2021, p. 135-136).

However, it is important to note, that since Easy language texts are not solely translations but can be considered adaptations, language quality assurance is not sufficient. Language quality insurance is done by proof-readers. Their assessment and corrections must be harmonized with the results of the comprehension assessment, which is done by validators with support from facilitators.

The main purpose of this chapter is to gain an understanding of what the validation process and the assessment are, who participates in the process, how the validation is conducted and what are the expected benefits.

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[1] Experts are divided on describing the process as *translation*, as some advocate the fact that the process of making information easy to read and understand comes closer to *adaptation.*

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THE VALIDATION PROCESS

Validation of Easy language information, most often texts but also images and multimodal information, is a process of assessing whether the content is, in fact, in Easy language or Easy-to-read. The process should actively include the end-users of Easy language information and is often considered to be a crucial part in the process of publishing Easy-to-understand information (Knapp, 2021).

There are two sides to the validation process: validating comprehensibility and validating comprehension (Maass, 2021). Validating comprehensibility is assessing if the guidelines for Easy language information, such as the European guidelines by Inclusion Europe (2009), were followed. This assessment can be done by the author of the information.

On the other hand, validating comprehension, which includes, e.g., language comprehension and image comprehension, requires cooperation of the target group - the validators. While Easy-to-Read language or Easy language was essentially designed to meet the needs of people with intellectual, cognitive or learning disabilities, benefits for users with a variety of abilities have been reported (Vollenwyder et al, 2018). Correspondingly, people with intellectual, cognitive or learning disabilities are traditionally regarder as active or prospective validators, however, other target groups should be considered for the role, also.

Language comprehension involves analysis at different levels (such as word, sentence, or message analysis) and the integration of message meaning with the prior discourse and world knowledge, as described by Singer in 2013 (Knapp, 2021). Similar logic can be applied to image comprehension.

Haramija and Knapp (2019) describe two common approaches to adapting the text to make it easier to read and understand. In the first approach, the author of the text works together with the validators from the beginning. If the original information in standard language exists, they read it together and adapt the contents together. As this can be very time-consuming and nearly impossible if the volume of the original text is large, the second approach is used more often. In this approach, the author prepares drafts of the text in Easy language. The validators join the process after the initial drafts had been prepared.

Validators, who are supported by facilitators, assess comprehension of the content. Together they analyse the information and give feedback. (Knapp, 2021)

As with every published information, texts should be proof-read by a language expert who, in case of

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working with Easy language texts, should know the logic and guidelines of the concept.
Validated information in Easy language is usually, as a proof of validation, marked with a logo. One
such example is the European logo for Easy-to-read information by Inclusion Europe in blue colour,
showing a person holding a book and giving a thumbs-up, or a national logo for Easy-to-read
information, such as the logo for Easy Slovene by Zavod RISA, a purple round sign with a winking
book (Knapp, 2021).

Image 1: European logo for Easy-to-read information (©Inclusion Europe)

Image 2: Slovene logo for Easy-to-read information (©Zavod RISA)

As Easy Slovene has 4 distinct difficulty levels, the level of difficulty is to be assigned and an
appropriate logo for the corresponding level should also be applied (Haramija and Knapp, 2019).

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Image 3: Logos for Easy Slovene levels (1-4).

To sum up the process of validation[2], following stages can be determined:

I.   Creation of a draft in Easy language (can be created with or without cooperation from the target group).

II.   Consultations with experts on the topic of the consultation (may sometimes precede phase I).

III.   Validation of the draft with the target group and feedback.

IV.   Corrections to the draft.

V.   Proofreading by a language expert.

VI.   Provision of the guidelines for the designer.

VII.   Final checking or validation of the readily designed product with a target group, any final corrections and final approval.

VIII.   Publication of the final product.

The process can be generally the same for texts and images, however, if they are the part of one publication, simultaneous validation of both can be applied.

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[2] The example applies for Slovenia.

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WHO ARE THE VALIDATORS?

When we speak of validators in context of Easy language, the validators are people from the target group who assess the comprehension of the information. Later, we will address some controversy in opinions of researchers and practitioners whether the contribution of the validators is in fact essential for the process. For now, our initial objective is to examine their role in the quality assurance of Easy language information.

Not limited to the target group of people with intellectual disabilities, who were traditionally linked to the process of validation, but also including people with low literacy skills, elderly, and recent immigrants, e. g., European project Professional training for easy-to-read facilitators and validators - TRAIN2VALIDATE addresses two important job roles, involved in the validation process: validators and facilitators. The initial results of the research within the project show that the validators and the facilitators often do not receive adequate training and are not recognized as ''real professions''. The project, however, redirects the perception of a disability as a burden to the perspective of a competitive advantage that can be used to identify possible difficulties which cannot be identified by other professionals who are included in the process. End-users who read the texts, e.g., assess the comprehension, are therewith involved in the creation of the content through validation and must be recognised as validators. The other job role addressed, the facilitator, provides the validators with the necessary support in the process and too, lack recognition. TRAIN2VALIDATE aims at recognition of these two roles and is to develop harmonised training across Europe via a competence-based curriculum and open-source training materials.

During the initial stage of the TRAIN2VALIDATE project, common methodological framework, and best practices in validation across Europe were identified. Not surprisingly, most of the validators and facilitators who answered the survey, would like to learn more about Easy-to-read or Easy language and do more training. They believe they need better skills and knowledge and stated they are very likely to enrol in a program to become certified validators and/or facilitators. To shed a light on where the efforts to include the target groups to achieve quality and useful end-results stem from, it is important to mention that most of the respondents collaborate with or are a member of an association. Most of them work in a non-profit organization, the second biggest group in public institutions and the third largest at universities. Most of the respondents revealed that they are not

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paid for the work they do. They work in a team that consist of other validators, facilitators, or writers. (Dejica et al, 2021).

INTERACTION PROCESS BETWEEN FACILITATORS AND VALIDATORS

Communication is essential for the validation process and is the key to successful validation. Based on practical experience, working with hundreds of validators over a course of a decade, and literature review, Haramija and Knapp defined a list of ''golden rules'' - tips for facilitators for communicating with the end-users and validators:

- showing respect;
- allowing enough time for understanding and processing the message to give feedback;
- speaking relatively slowly and clearly;
- choosing a quiet location for the validation sessions (eliminating possible interference);
- addressing the validator directly (if accompanied by a support person);
- checking if the validators use communicators, folders with pictograms or a related low or high technology devices[3];
- focusing on the abilities (strong points) of the validators;
- using simple language and short sentences;
- admitting to failing to understand the message that the validator is trying to communicate, if needed;
- asking adequate questions;
- checking comprehension of the validator, rephrasing messages and questions, if needed;
- using (incorporating) real-life examples;
- repeating and summarizing important information;
- ensuring confidentiality.

These tips help us understand the working (group) dynamics between the facilitators and the validators.

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[3] Augmentative and alternative communication can be very useful. If the person does not use it and if we work together with them for a longer period of time, assessing whether they would benefit from communication aids could be in place. Try finding the methods and tools that really work. Remember that people likely understand more than it seems. Sometimes a lack of feedback does not stem from possible poor understanding. The validator could also have difficulties expressing the feedback. (Knapp, 2021)

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Not surprisingly, asking adequate questions is considered one of the most important components of the process. While some questions are useful and lead towards high-quality end-products, others are inadequate and can only serve as a formality.

Useful questions are most often the ones that are specific and related to the text or image that is being validated. Those are usually the 5 Ws questions: who, what, when, where and why.

Examples of useful questions could be:

- ✓ Why did the cat fell off the shelf?
- ✓ What do you see in this picture?
- ✓ How many cars does the boss have?
- ✓ When was the woman born?
- ✓ Who jumped from behind the car?
- ✓ In which country or where is Paris located?

Questions that do not help the validation process, on the other hand, are mostly questions that can be answered with a ''yes'' or a ''no'' or the ones that make the validator choose option they like the best. Examples of types of questions to be avoided, could be:

- – Did you understand what the text says?
- – Is the illustration clear and adequate?
- – Do you think the text is well written?
- – Do you prefer the version A or the version B?
- – Is the text written in Easy language?

Those questions can give false confirmations and do not ensure the quality of the final validated product.

To further illustrate this point, we provide an example of a fictional Easy language text that needs to be validated:

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Simona is standing in the alley.

The alley is dark.

It is past midnight.

The wind is howling.

But Simona is not afraid.

She is feeling great.

If we want to assure the comprehension of the above text, examples of the questions to ask the validators, could be:

Who is standing in the alley? Or: Where is Simona standing?

What kind of alley is it? Or: Can you describe the alley?

How is Simona feeling?

Inadequate or at least less useful questions that could give false results would be, e.g.:

Is Simona standing in the alley?

Is alley dark or light?

Is Simona afraid?

Is Simona feeling sad?

Is this text in Easy language?

The listed questions can be either answered with a ''yes'' or a ''no'', giving the validator 50% chance to provide feedback with the ''correct'' answer, if unsure, or by selecting an option (''dark or light''?), again offering at least 50% chance of the ''correct'' response.

Also, it should be noted, that the questions in focus are mainly literal; this corresponds with a study by Fajardo et al (2014) which evaluated reading comprehension levels of students with mild intellectual disabilities and low reading skills, showing that involved participants correctly answered 80% of the literal questions[4], which was a significantly higher score as compared to inferential questions[5].

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[4] Literal questions have responses directly stated in the text.

[5] Inferential questions do not have direct answers stated in the text but the text does hold clues.

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A general guideline would be to ask the validators a single clear question at the time, with the facilitator leading them through the information step by step, checking the comprehension thoroughly. Asking questions, however, is not the only strategy to check comprehension with the validators. Summarizing, e. g., can be useful, too. In summarizing, a validator reduces large text to essential information and the general idea of the text and presents it in a feedback.

It is important to always note that the validator must be made aware they are not the ones on the test! In the process of validating the text, we are never testing the validator, always the text.

Another practical tip for working with the validators is asking the validators to read the text or a word out loud. Some words can be namely easy to understand yet difficult to read; by hearing the text out loud, one might discover additional loops, such as, e.g., too many words in a line, or redundant words (Knapp, 2021).

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Experience shows that the facilitators sometimes provide the validators with various drafts, two or more, and ask them to choose the ''clearer'' or ''better'' one. The following short texts, we will name them A, B and C, are fictional and put here to exemplify the previous statement:

Simona is standing in the alley.
The alley is dark.
It is past midnight.

B

Simona is standing in a dark alley.
The clock in the church tower already stroke midnight.

C

Simona is in an alley.
Because it is already past midnight, the alley is dark.

Giving the validators instructions to select the most suitable or understandable text without first checking comprehension for all the provided texts is not real validation. If the facilitator does provide more than one draft, all the drafts should be assessed for comprehension with the validators and only then the most suitable draft is to be selected for further use.

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So far, the chapter focused mainly on validation of texts. Images are tested or validated similarly. To illustrate the process, we provide examples of two images- the first image was designed for use in Easy language texts and the second image was designed for a particular Easy language text.

Image 1 is taken from a free online database (Lahko je brati, 2019):

Image 1: A carer is spoon-feeding a man.

The image shows a person in white coat, holding a full spoon, offering it to a man who rests in a hospital bed. There is a small table with a bowl between them. Testing the comprehension, examples of adequate questions to ask the validators, would be, e. g.:

- ✓ How many people are there in the picture? Or: Who is in the picture?
- ✓ What is happening in the picture? Or: What are the people in the picture doing?
- ✓ Could you please describe the scene in the picture?

Inadequate questions for checking comprehension would be, e. g.:

- Is the woman feeding a man in this picture? Or: Who is feeding who in this picture?
- Do you understand the scene? Or: Is this picture hard to understand?

Image 2 was designed specifically for a leaflet in project Voices for Justice (2021). The image shows three people sitting behind a table. A man is holding his right hand in the air, left hand resting on a piece of paper with text on it. There are also two women at the table.

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Image 2: A man and 2 women are discussing a document.

Testing the comprehension, examples of suitable questions to ask the validators, could, again, be, e. g.:

- ✓ How many people are there in the picture? Or: Who is in the picture?
- ✓ What is happening in the picture? Or: What are the people in the picture doing?
- ✓ Could you please describe the scene in the picture?

Inadequate questions for checking comprehension would be, e. g.:

- – Is a man speaking in this picture? Or: Are the people in the picture talking?
- – Do you understand the scene? Or: Is this picture hard to understand?

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CONTROVERSY OF VALIDATING WITH THE TARGET GROUPS

Slovene guidelines (Haramija et al, 2019) follows the rules of the European guidelines (Information for all, 2009) and states that information must be validated by the validators (test readers-consultants). The names of the validators are to be listed among the authors. Haramija and Knapp recommend people from the groups of target readers to participate in the whole process of preparing the material in Easy language, meaning they are involved in the selection of the topics already. Though, narrowly speaking, the validation process is a part of the production phase. It is important to note, however, that the guidelines do not speak exclusively about people with intellectual (cognitive) disabilities as validators, as it is the case with European guidelines, but rather state that the authors of the materials must know who their target group is and work together with participants of that group. (Haramija and Knapp, 2019)

Maass, however, argues that involvement of the validators (text assessors), as representatives of the target groups, ''does not necessarily have a form that yields reliable results, but it is nonetheless considered to be central especially in the context of empowerment,'' (p. 183). She states that revision with the primary target groups based on every single text that is produced are controversial as they ''tend to slow down text production and complicate consistent terminology management and are thus not necessarily helpful in making consistent content quickly available.'' Furthermore, the resulting texts, as per Maass, often stress the differentness of the target group, thus increasing the risk of stigmatization. Maass does, however, also emphasize the symbolic function of Easy language, as central for inclusion of the primary target group which is stigmatised and ''needs strong advocacy'', though this approach can be considered problematic due to the forementioned differentness and exclusion of other target groups of Easy language (Maass, 183-184).

Maass lists pros and cons (136-137) of the text assessment with the target group.

She lists several pros:

+ showing active involvement of people with disabilities by the contracting authority,

+ being part of the process to appropriate Easy Language as a tool for group identity,

+ providing remuneration as well as recognition for the primary target groups,

+ often leading to improved reading skills and comprehension of the members of the primary target groups that are regularly involved in the assessment processes.

+ helping translators form their assumptions about the primary target groups and their comprehension.

+ helping legitimize Easy Language translators without disabilities and displaying their connection to the target groups.

According to Maass, there are also several cons:

- inconsistent results (due to the heterogeneous and highly individual nature of a disability)

- giving priority to the group of people with cognitive impairments, primary target groups with other profiles being neglected and the texts are optimized about the preferences of the target group the validators belong to, or even the specific personal needs of the validators leading to text orders being placed by contracting authorities not based on text expertise but based on available assessment facilities. The result are many texts with poor quality as agencies are preferred that have direct contact with the target groups but are not necessarily trained translators,

- increasing text production processes in price and slowing the process down, leading to a smaller number of texts being produced for the same amount of money, contractors economizing on text quality, and fewer texts of text types being quick in production and consumption (like news or frequently updated parts of homepages) (Maass, 136-137).

The last argument could be argued with a question why the profile of the validator would be the one to be eliminated from the process and why no other roles are challenged (e.g., proof-reader who assures the language proficiency of the text)?

More research in this field is needed.

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A REAL-LIFE SITUATION EXAMPLE

An association submitted an order for a publication of a legal Act in Easy language. The main identified target group were people with intellectual and learning disabilities. The order was submitted to a non-governmental organization which provides adaptation services.

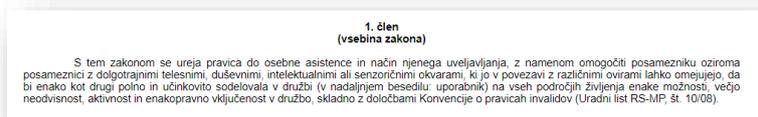The original Act has 36 paragraphs and is written in standard language.

Image 3: Paragraph 1 of Personal Assistance Act

First off, the original Act was analysed by a team of experts, which consisted of a specialist on law, two long-time providers of the service that the Act addressed, a coordinator for social services and an Easy language expert. After the most important focus points and possible ambiguous issues that may arise had been identified, the Easy language expert made the first draft of the Act in Easy language on 65 pages, at stage 4 of Easy Slovene.[6] The text did not include only the adaptation of the standard text, e.g., but introduction to the topic, real-life examples, and vocabulary, making it a handbook on the Act.

A facilitator gathered a group of 5 validators with intellectual disabilities which met 4 times. Each validation session lasted approx. 90 minutes. The validation group, engaging in interaction process as describer in the previous chapter of this paper, suggested several corrections to the draft text and identified pieces of information that would benefit from images.

Following the first validation, the service provider ordered original images from an artist. The artist was given detailed guidelines on what information should be conveyed in each image.

The Easy language expert made the corrections, suggested by the validation group. At the same time the images were being produced, the corrected text in Easy language was checked by a language expert- proof-reader.

The validation group gathered again to validate the proposed images. As the artist had very detailed orientation and the images were simple, only a few minor changes were suggested.

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[6] For stages of Easy Slovene, see Handbooks of Easy languages in Europe.

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The Easy language expert provided the designer with guidelines for designing publications in Easy language.

The designed publication was once again validated with a group of validators, who were not the same people who validated the draft as they intended to get a clear fresh picture of the end-user experience. A few minor changes were suggested and implemented.

The final approval before printing was done by the client and the service provider. The finished publication is a book of 90 pages of text, of which 71 pages is text and images in Easy language, and the remaining pages is the original act for reference.
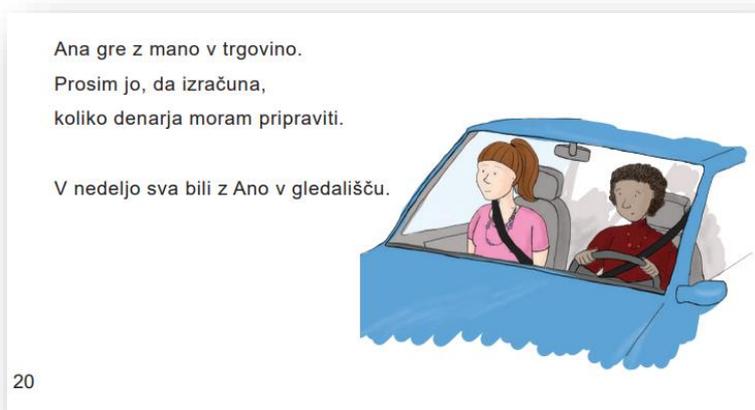

Image 4: An example from the adapted text, Handbook on Personal Assistance Act

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