

Article

Putting a Spotlight on Validators of Easy-to-Read Content

Rocío Bernabé *  and Piero Cavallo * 

International University, SDI München, 81379 Munich, Germany

* Correspondence: rocio.bernabe@sdi-muenchen.de (R.B.); piero.cavallo@sdi-muenchen.de (P.C.)

Abstract: Easy-to-Read content results from applying text simplification principles to make information accessible for persons with reading and learning difficulties. While both the creation process and simplification principles have gained the interest of scholars and the general public in the past years, the role of validators is still less visible compared with that of writers or translators. This paper sought to put a spotlight on validators by answering the questions of who these professionals are, what tasks they take on, and how they have acquired the necessary knowledge and skills for the job. In doing so, it investigated a subset of the data about validators' demographical and educational backgrounds and current activity collected in an online survey launched within the innovative framework of the Erasmus+ project Train2Validate.

Keywords: Easy-to-Read language; Easy Language; Easy-to-Understand language; validators; facilitators; comprehensibility assessment; participatory validation



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1. Introduction

Searching for academic literature on participatory validation of Easy-to-Read (E2R) content and the roles involved requires perseverance from a researcher. While E2R, as a text simplification methodology, is described within and outside academia, bibliographical references to validation, as the comprehensibility assessment of texts, are scarce and often non-scholarly [1–4].

Validation is also neither defined nor recognized as a profession according to the European Skills/Competences, Qualifications and Occupations (ESCO) [5] or the European Regulated professions database [6]. Indeed, it can be presumed that such a void fosters the diverse understandings of the concept, goals, tasks, and job roles involved in the process.

This article aimed to contribute to the visibility of participatory validation by shedding light on the profiles behind one of the job roles, i.e., validators, who are persons with reading and learning difficulties [3,4,7–9]. To achieve this goal, the paper presented a subset of data collected in an online survey carried out within the pioneering research work of the Erasmus+ project Train2Validate: <https://plenainclusionmadrid.org/train2validate/> (accessed on 10 December 2021). The demographic, educational, and professional data gathered were used in the following stages of the project to design an effective training program that caters to learners' preferences and motivations and builds upon effective training methods for validators. The report presenting all the data from the survey can be downloaded at: <https://bit.ly/31k78RH> (accessed on 10 December 2021).

2. Terminology Matters

Before moving forward, a clarification about how the terms “Easy-to-Read” and “validators” are used in this article seems appropriate. However, the short excerpt does not intend to solve the current lack of univocity among countries and approaches [7,8], nor to provide a solution, especially if end-users of E2R have not been involved.

The term “Easy-to-Read” or “easy to read” is a compound adjective [10] that is used outside the realm of accessibility to refer to texts that require little effort from a reader to be understood. In accessibility contexts, however, the compound means content that

addresses the needs of persons with reading and learning difficulties by using cognitive text simplification recommendations [1–3,11,12]. A closer look, however, shows a polysemic use and various spellings of the term “Easy-to-Read” in accessibility research and practice. For instance, “Easy-to-Read” and “Easy to read” are used as compound nouns to refer to Easy-to-Read as a writing method and a linguistic variety [12,13], and as compound adjectives to designate the resulting product: Easy-to-Read content [9].

The German scholar Christiane Maaß [14] attempted to solve the ambiguity caused by this polysemic use by suggesting and categorising two new terms: Easy Language and Easy Language Plus. The term “Easy Language” is proposed as a loan translation from the German term “*Leichte Sprache*” to designate any linguistic variety with ‘maximally enhanced comprehensibility’ [14] (p. 53). This strategy makes it possible to solve the connotative ambiguity at a denotative level. However, the restrictive definition generates another problem, which the scholar solved by introducing the concept of Easy Language Plus as a category between Easy and Plain Language.

While such a categorisation may be helpful, for instance, in teaching contexts, the concept of ‘optimal comprehensibility’ introduced by Bettina Bock in 2018 [15] seems to solve the matter without additional terms or categories. The scholar argued for simplification as a tool for reaching the degree of comprehensibility needed in a given situation for the intended audience. The underlying idea is that maximal simplification in terms of language and content does not consistently deliver the best results, as also pointed out by other scholars [16,17]. For instance, a maximally simplified text may be boring for the reader [15] or challenge them in the process of inference and recollection [8,11,16–18].

Aiming at optimal comprehensibility enables E2R translators and writers to consider personal factors (e.g., motivation, reading skills, previous knowledge), as well as textual ones (e.g., text surface, text length, function, structure). By doing so, optimal comprehensibility makes rigid categorisations unnecessary and allows text producers to move freely within the Easy-to-Read and Plain Language continuum. As a result, texts, and even parts thereof, can be adapted according to their function, purpose, and target audience.

For the aforesaid reasons and the lack of consensus on the new terminology, we prioritise the form Easy-to-Read, which is coherent with the authors’ previous work. Indeed, Christiane Maaß herself stated in her book that “‘Easy-to-Read’ is [an] established [term] and has been in use for decades’ [14] (p. 53).

The terms “validators” and “validation” are used in this paper as defined in the project [19] to refer to persons with reading and learning difficulties who participate in a process aimed at validating, i.e., confirming the comprehensibility of texts. This choice provides the authors with an ad hoc strategy to manage the scarcity of literature, and the univocity identified, with concurrent terms, such as ‘testing’ [20] (p. 10), ‘proof-reading’ [21], and ‘assessor’ [14].

Some of these terms resemble those used in translation quality-assessment tasks as defined in the standard ISO 17100:2015 (i.e., ‘check’, ‘proofread’, and ‘review’) [22] (p. 1). However, none of them seem to be interchangeable with the task of validators of E2R content. While “check” can be excluded because it is attached to the translator’s role, “proofread” is bound to the person applying the corrections to a text. The remaining task, i.e., “review”, is the closest to that of validators, for it aims to assess the suitability of the content for the ‘intended purpose’ [22] (p. 2). Assuming that comprehensibility assessment is part of this task, for it is not specified in the standard, it can be presumed that the assessment must be carried out by a member of the targeted audience, as the intended purpose is that the text should be comprehensible for persons with reading and learning difficulties. For this reason, we use the term “validators” to avoid a polysemic use of the terms already included in the standard. Furthermore, we strive to remain coherent with the project terminology and previous articles by the authors [8,9,23–26] and adopt a term used in non-academic sources in the same way as we do [1,2,27,28].

3. Research Background

A closer look into current practice and research in comprehensibility assessment of E2R texts reveals two different approaches in nature: participatory and non-participatory. The main difference is the framework in which they operate. While participatory validations consider social and linguistic parameters and encompass end-users' involvement in the assessment [29], non-participatory approaches rely on readability measurements and expert-based evaluations carried out by persons without reading and learning difficulties [13,14,30].

In Germany, scholars representing non-participatory approaches argue, for instance, that participatory validations include subjective views of end-users who are put together randomly [13,14,31] and, therefore, should be ruled out. Maaß described other drawbacks of participatory approaches in her book published in 2020. With regards to the process itself, the scholar mentioned that participatory validations 'often' [14] (p. 183) slow down the production process, do not guarantee reliable results, and deliver texts that 'stress their differentness with regard to standard texts, increasing the risk of stigmatising the primary target groups' [14] (p. 184). These drawbacks add to the one already pointed out by the scholar and her co-author in 2016, namely, that validators read the texts aloud during validations. According to the scholars, reading aloud for the other validators in the group disagrees with the goal of making a text comprehensible without support, which, in this case, is the person reading the text aloud.

Regarding validators (called 'assessors' in the book), as a profile within the 'primary target group' of E2R [14] (p. 183), Maaß stressed their lack of translation competence and the fact that they make 'consistent terminology management' complicated (p. 183). From the scholar's perspective, involving persons from the primary target groups in text assessment tasks supports the 'symbolic' function of what she calls "Easy Language" (p. 184). In the specific case of persons with cognitive impairment, she argued that while their involvement and training support their empowerment, their contribution 'usually' does not deliver reliable data on the actual comprehensibility of a text (p. 184).

The scholar's publication and, specifically, chapter 5.5 about text assessors summarises the position of non-participatory scholars in Germany. The underlying idea is that empirically-proved parameters (e.g., lexical, syntactical, morphological) provide objective linguistic patterns for reducing the complexity of texts. For this reason, the recommended methodology is non-participatory and relies on automatic comprehensibility tests and linguistic and translation analyses carried out by experts who compare the source text and the E2R version.

While the book is informative, the views about participatory validation are scarcely referenced, especially in chapter 5.5., and the stated drawbacks lack a comparison with data from participatory research and projects, such as the research project *Leichte Sprache im Arbeitsleben* (In English, Easy-to-Read in working contexts. <https://research.uni-leipzig.de/leisa/>, accessed on 10 December 2021) (LeiSA) or the inclusion project *Fachkraft Leichte Sprache* (In English, a specialist in Easy-to-Read. <https://fachkraft-leichte-sprache.de/>, accessed on 10 December 2021). The starting point of LeiSA was a lack of research and harmonisation in the field, while *Fachkraft Leichte Sprache* aimed at providing training to enable validators access to the labour market. For this reason, the outputs can be described as ground-breaking, for they deliver the first empirically-based data. Discussing all aspects would exceed the scope of this article; therefore, we sketched only some aspects.

LeiSA was funded by the Federal Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (BMAS) and carried out by scholars from the University of Leipzig between 2014 and 2018. The project aimed to evaluate the effectiveness of E2R in working life and studied participatory validations from the linguistic and the social perspective [15]. The outcomes are relevant because it was the first research project on participatory validation conducted in Germany and internationally and because of its participatory methodology. For its part, the project *Fachkraft Leichte Sprache* aimed to design a training that would enable persons with reading and learning difficulties to work as validators of E2R content. The project was funded by the BMAS and conducted in collaboration with the end-users associations Caritas Augsburg

(<http://www.caritas-augsburg.de/>, accessed on 10 December 2021) and Netzwerk Leichte Sprache (<https://www.leichte-sprache.org/>, accessed on 10 December 2021). The project outputs, e.g., the training materials, were created in collaboration with persons with reading and learning difficulties [32]. The project was finished in 2021.

As described before, professionals and scholars representing participatory approaches argue that transforming linguistic patterns does not always lead to comprehension, nor does the fact that an E2R text is a simplified one-to-one translation of a standard source text [33]. Therefore, assessing whether a text enables the intended readers to communicate in the intended situation requires their involvement.

This approach to comprehensibility assessment is multidimensional and draws upon cognitive constructivism. In this sense, it is presumed that whether a text fulfils its function or not occurs during the interaction with the end-user. In this interplay, the characteristics of the individual readers (e.g., reading proficiency, type of disability, general or specific prior knowledge, textual knowledge, expectations) are at focus in the creation of knowledge during the interaction with a text and its linguistic make-up (e.g., lexicon, syntax, structure).

The data from the LeiSA help us understand the goals of this comprehensibility assessment from a linguistic point of view [34] (p. 174):

“Das Ziel der Textprüfung aus sprachwissenschaftlicher Sicht ist es also, Verständlichkeitsproblemen zu finden und zu beschreiben. Dabei werden zwei verschiedene Typen von Informationen gewonnen, die im Folgenden als Wo-Informationen und Was-Informationen bezeichnet werden.” (From a linguistic perspective, text validation aims to identify comprehensibility difficulties in a text and describe them. Accordingly, the process delivers two types of information, i.e., information about “where” the difficulty is in the text and about “what” type of difficulty it is. (Translation by the authors)).

The definition outlines the core tasks of validators, i.e., identifying “where” comprehensibility is at stake in a text and describing “what” the difficulty is. To do so, it seems natural that the person carrying out the task must be a person with reading and learning difficulties. Whether the task is carried out by the validator alone or in a group was also studied in LeiSA. According to the data obtained [35], the current practice in Germany shows both tandem validations with one validator and a facilitator, and group validations with groups of 4–6 validators and one facilitator [35]. Lastly, as for the need to read the text aloud, the data obtained identified this as one of the techniques used during validations. That is, in other cases, validators may read the text on their own and use a highlighter to mark the difficulties [34,35].

Similar accounts of participatory validations are also found outside academia, for instance, by end-user associations, such as Inclusion Europe [1], Netzwerk Leichte Sprache [36], and Plena Inclusión Madrid [27], and standardisation organisations such as the Spanish UNE [28]. They all coincide with Fröhlich [37] in that the process is user-centric, guided by a so-called facilitator, and that the goal is comprehensibility assessment by end-users.

Plena Inclusión Madrid [27] (p. 12) provided a detailed definition that describes validation as a ‘key part of a publishing process’ that is carried out by ‘professionals with reading and learning difficulties’ in collaboration with ‘facilitators, who are support persons’, to determine whether ‘a text is comprehensible’ for the intended users and ‘to check the compliance with the European guidelines for Easy to Read’. Figure 1 illustrates the five-stage process designed by Plena Inclusión Madrid and the two job roles adapted by Bernabé et al. for validating easy subtitles [9].

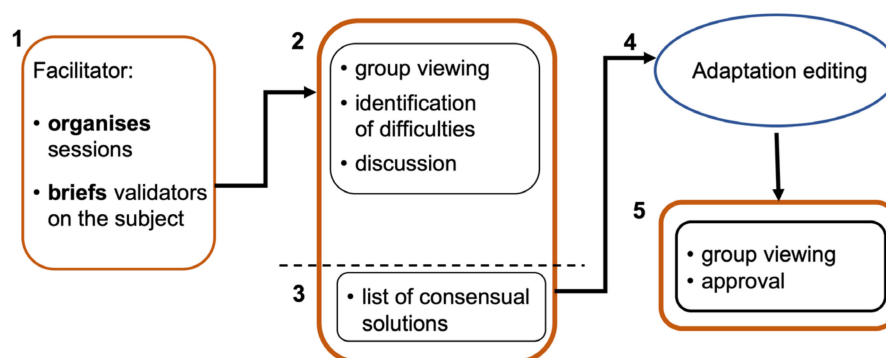


Figure 1. Adapted validation process for easy subtitles [9].

- Stage 1: a facilitator prepares a text and sets up a room for the validation sessions. Validators receive a general explanation of the intended text.
- Stage 2: validators read the text to identify comprehension difficulties.
- Stage 3: validators read the text out loud and comment together on the detected difficulties.
- Stage 4: validators suggest solutions for each comprehension difficulty, which have to be accepted by the whole group.
- Stage 5: validators re-read the text with the proposed solutions.

The question of whether validators have undergone training before entering the profession was also analysed in LeiSA from a social-demographical perspective. The data showed that 22 out of the 40 validators involved in the study had received training before starting as validators. The results, together with the emerged projects *Fachkraft Leichte Sprache* and *Train2Validate*, that aim to harmonise training, seem to answer, to some extent, the question about the reliability of validations' outputs and the value of their contribution.

Despite their opposing views, scholars from both approaches and non-academic experts agree that further research is needed for bridging existing gaps. For instance, the need for reception studies with eye-tracking [38], for sound knowledge about the target audiences [39], for reception studies in easy audiovisual content [40], empirically-based guidelines [2,13], the systematisation of validation process [8,35], or the need for harmonised training across Europe [19]. The latter is one of the goals of the Train2Validate project.

4. The Train2Validate Project

The need for the recognition of facilitators and validators led to the Erasmus+ co-funded project Train2Validate (T2V), which started in September 2020 and will end in August 2023. The project not only aims to foster the recognition of the two emerging job roles, i.e., facilitators and validators, but also to harmonise training across Europe. To this end, the project is carried out by a strategic partnership encompassing three universities, three end-user associations, and one certification association (International University SDI München (Germany), Scuola Superiore per Mediatori Linguistici di Pisa (Italy), Politehnica University of Timișoara (Romania), Plena Inclusión Madrid (Spain), Fundatia Professional (Romania), Zavod Risa (Slovenia), and ECQA (Austria)).

The project is structured in six Intellectual Outputs (IOs) that will lead to tangible results. Intellectual Output 1 (IO1) aimed to collect empirical data about the current training and practice in Europe. The data served as a first impulse for the next IOs. The skills card, i.e., a description of the professional skills, abilities, and knowledge associated with the two job roles, has resulted from IO2. The skills cards are organised by competence areas and encompass data from IO1 and a comparative analysis of existing skills cards from other Erasmus+ projects. The skills cards can be downloaded here: <https://bit.ly/3IUCGOV> (accessed on 10 December 2021). Then, in IO3, the focus will be on designing a curriculum which will deliver the pedagogical framework for the training programs. After that, during IO4, the necessary open-source, accessible educational content will be created. In IO5, the

training materials will be assessed by prospective trainees and trainers in an iterative process. Lastly, IO6 is a transversal work package that seeks to certify the materials according to the standards of the European Certification and Qualification Association, ECQA.

The following sections present the research method used in IO1 for the data collection on current practice and training in validation and facilitation in Europe. Then, it organises the results by type of data, i.e., demographic, educational background, training in E2R, as the subject area, and working environment. Lastly, a description of the profile is presented and discussed.

5. Methodology

The method chosen to gather data on the current status of training and certification of validators and facilitators across Europe was a survey, and the tool was a multilingual online questionnaire. The survey was conducted online to reach the highest number of participants possible, which Wright [41] described as effective in cases in which potential participants are geographically spread.

A key factor in the methodology design was the fact that Erasmus+ projects are subjected to strict time and funding constraints for conducting the working packages, i.e., the IOs. These limitations forced partners to rule out options, such as the triangulation of the data obtained in the survey, or the conduction of focus groups prior the survey. Nonetheless, the process was guided by three universities, following recommendations from the literature [24,42] and ethical standards [43]. The data collected enables partners to fulfil the aim, i.e., to provide a first description of the situation across the project countries and other countries willing to participate. As for the reproducibility, the IO1 report includes the questionnaire in English.

The main targeted respondents were facilitators and validators who currently work in these positions. Additionally, stakeholders were approached to gather their views on the professions from their own field of expertise. These include E2R procurers (i.e., writers, publishing houses, NGOs, or organisations that publish E2R content), scholars, and researchers.

Prior to participation, respondents were asked for their informed consent in compliance with the recommendations and ethical principles by the American Psychological Association, APA [25]. Lastly, participants were notified about the estimated time of completion, which was 15 min. The introductory section of the questionnaire also informed tentative participants with reading and learning difficulties about the possibility of seeking support when providing their responses.

A draft of the survey was created in English and assessed by the T2V consortium. The resulting questionnaire was translated into all project languages (German, Italian, Romanian, Slovene, and Spanish). A total of 66 questions appeared after an introductory part and were organised in five individual sections:

- Demographic profile,
- General Education and Training,
- Education and Training in E2R,
- Current Activity, and, finally,
- Skills.

The closing section of the questionnaire included questions about elements that can also be considered in future training programs (e.g., receiving a certificate upon completion or estimated length of the programs), as well as respondents' views on their need and willingness to participate or recommend such training programs.

The multilingual survey was launched on 3 February 2021 and remained open for a period of 6 weeks, during which it was disseminated by all partners through their social and professional networks. At the end of this period, the survey was officially closed on 10 March 2021, and the links on the project website became inactive. A total of 337 respondents took part in the survey: 15 experts filled in the German version, 41 filled

in the Italian version, 48 filled in the Romanian version, 58 filled in the Slovenian version, and 175 filled in the Spanish version.

From the total number of respondents, 97 worked as validators. The questionnaire did not collect data about the type of reading or learning difficulty of the person answering the validators' section because the profile was already described in the introduction. Respondents' profiles show how broad the group of persons with reading and learning difficulties is, as can be inferred from Table 9 describing their educational backgrounds. Nonetheless, not having included this question also implies that a person without reading or learning difficulties might have also identified themselves as a validator and responded. Because we are aware of the different understandings of the profession and because having a degree of disability or a reading and learning difficulty was not a prerequisite to answering the questions, the responses were included.

As Table 1 below shows, the number of respondents in Spain was more than double the responses collected in the other countries. This difference can be explained by the established position of E2R in Spain and points to solid networks of end-user associations, as also revealed by the data. The data presented in this paper encompass the validators' responses.

Table 1. Response distribution (please note that the names of the countries do not refer to respondents' countries of origin, but to the version of the questionnaire they answered).

Responses	Validators
Spain	70
Slovenia	18
Romania	7
Germany	2
Italy	0
Total	97

6. Results

The next subsections present the data about the demographics, educational background, training in E2R, and current activities of the respondents working as validators.

6.1. Demographic Profile

The majority of the 97 validators lived in the countries that represent the project. All of the 70 validators who answered the Spanish version of the survey lived in Spain, all of the 18 validators who took the Slovenian version of the survey lived in Slovenia, and all of the seven validators who answered the Romanian survey lived in Romania. Among the two validators who took the German version of the survey, one lived in Germany and one lived in Austria.

The first languages of respondents also reflect the version of the survey which they answered, with the only exception being the Spanish version, wherein 68 had Spanish as their first language, while the other two had, respectively, Polish and Russian.

Most validators were relatively young with the largest portion in the range between 31 and 40 years old. Table 2 shows the data grouped by the language of the survey.

Table 2. Age distribution of validators by version of the survey.

Age	20–30	31–40	41–50	51–60	Over 61	Total
Spain	19	28	18	4	1	70
Slovenia	1	6	8	3	-	18
Romania	-	1	5	-	1	7
Germany	1	-	-	1	-	2
Italy	-	-	-	-	-	-
Total	21	35	31	8	2	97

A slight majority of validators identified themselves as female, while almost half of them identified themselves as male. One validator decided not to answer, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Gender distribution.

Country	Male	Female	I Prefer Not to Answer	Total
Spain	36	33	1	70
Slovenia	8	10	-	18
Romania	3	4	-	7
Germany	-	2	-	2
Italy	-	-	-	-
Total	47	49	1	97

Before working as E2R experts, half of the validators reported being unemployed. As for the types of professions mentioned by the other half, they were wide-ranging, with a majority of non-regulated ones, such as administrative assistant, caretaker, farmer, fruit harvester, or street cleaner.

As for their current work as validators of E2R content, the responses showed that most validators mainly worked part-time or were volunteers. Of the 97 validators, only 11 validators worked full time (Table 4). Furthermore, over half of the validators were not paid for their job (Table 5).

Table 4. Employment workload of validators as E2R experts.

Country	Full Time	Part Time	Volunteer	Total
Spain	5	43	22	70
Slovenia	1	4	13	18
Romania	5	-	2	7
Germany	-	-	2	2
Italy	-	-	-	-
Total	11	47	39	97

Table 5. Remuneration.

Country	Yes (Main Income)	Yes (Not Main Income)	No	Total
Spain	12	22	36	70
Slovenia	2	2	14	18
Romania	4	-	3	7
Germany	-	-	2	2
Italy	-	-	-	-
Total	18	24	55	97

Lastly, respondents reported working primarily in their first language and spending between 1 to 8 h per week, on average, on E2R content (Table 6).

Table 6. Working hours per week.

Country	Less Than 1	Between 1 and 8	More Than 8	Total
Spain	12	57	1	70
Slovenia	8	10	-	18
Romania	3	4	-	7
Germany	1	1	-	2
Italy	-	-	-	-
Total	24	72	1	97

Lastly, two thirds of validators had been working with E2R content between 1 and 5 years, while the rest of validators had either less than 1 year of experience or more than 5 years (Table 7). Validators were also asked how many validation projects they have been working on. Overall, the majority of validators answering the Spanish version of the survey had been working on more than 10 validation projects, while the situation in the other countries was more limited, with very few validators having worked on a conspicuous number of projects (Table 8).

Table 7. Years of experience of the validators.

Country	Less Than 1	Between 1 and 5	More Than 5	Total
Spain	8	54	8	70
Slovenia	5	11	2	18
Romania	4	-	3	7
Germany	-	1	1	2
Italy	-	-	-	-
Total	17	66	14	97

Table 8. Validation projects validators have been working on.

Country	One	1–5	5–10	More Than 10	Total
Spain	2	11	15	42	70
Slovenia	7	6	5	-	18
Romania	5	1	-	1	7
Germany	1	-	-	1	2
Italy	-	-	-	-	-
Total	15	18	20	44	97

6.2. General Education and Training

The total of 97 responses shows a wide range of literacies with the majority of validators having a non-academic background, i.e., either having undergone primary or secondary education, vocational training, or having attended a school for persons with special needs (Table 9).

Table 9. Highest degree in general education.

Country	None	Primary Education	Secondary Education	Vocational Courses	Under-Graduate	Master's Degree	PhD	I Prefer Not to Answer	Other	Total
Spain	3	25	20	8	1	-	-	2	11	70
Slovenia	-	4	4	1	2	-	-	-	7	18
Romania	-	-	-	1	4	2	-	-	-	7
Germany	-	-	-	1	-	-	1	-	-	2
Italy	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Total	3	29	24	11	7	2	1	2	18	97

With regards to their choices for continuous training, validators provided their input in a multiple-choice question. From the 253 answers gathered, it is possible to state that most validators engaged in training and experiential learning to improve their skills. The activities mostly take place in non-formal and informal settings, i.e., outside formal or regulated programs. According to the data (Table 10), the majority of the validators improved their knowledge and skills either by attending conferences and workshops, or by communicating with users of E2R, closely followed by in-house training.

Table 10. Activities for skills improvement.

Country	Conferences, Workshops, etc.	In-House Training	Research	Read Existing Literature	Communicate with Other Experts	Communicate with Users	Anything Specific	Other
Spain	38	39	4	21	21	47	6	13
Slovenia	15	7	2	2	3	6	2	5
Romania	3	2	-	3	3	-	1	-
Germany	2	1	2	2	2	1	-	-
Italy	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Total	58	49	8	28	29	54	9	18

6.3. Education in Easy-to-Read

As for the education and training in E2R (Table 11), 81 validators stated that they had received training related to E2R, while 16 had not. Interestingly, the ratios of validators receiving training (83.5%) compared to those without training (16.5%) resembled those found at national levels, with 88.6% of validators having had training in Spain and 88.9% in the case of Slovenia. Conversely, the ratios seem to be lower in Romania (28.6% to 71.4%) and Germany (50% to 50%). Nonetheless, the number of respondents in these two countries was low and could not be used to make assumptions.

Table 11. Validators who received training in E2R.

Country	Yes	No	Total
Spain	62	8	70
Slovenia	16	2	18
Romania	2	5	7
Germany	1	1	2
Italy	-	-	-
Total	81	16	97

As for the forms of education (Table 12), the responses show that learning takes place mostly outside academia: in workshops (28.1%), vocational courses (26.3%), in-house training (19.3%), internships (12.9%), and other types of training, such as attending E2R groups or learning directly from a facilitator, as stated in the free-text boxes.

Table 12. Types of training in E2R.

Country	Workshops	Vocational Course	University Course	Internship	In-House Training	Self-Taught	Other
Spain	33	43	6	22	30	9	3
Slovenia	14	1	1	-	3	-	2
Romania	-	1	-	-	-	-	1
Germany	1	-	-	-	-	1	-
Italy	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Total	48	45	7	22	33	10	6

Regarding the types of formats (Table 13), trained validators were more familiar with printed and digital content. The less attention that audiovisual content seems to receive in training supports the gap of E2R audiovisual content described by Bernabé and Orero [19], which ultimately led to the Erasmus+ project EASIT (<https://transmediacatalonia.uab.cat/easit/> accessed 31 August 2021). Interestingly, validators in Spain chose 36 times digital content (40% of the total hits for this country) as opposed to the situation in Slovenia and the other languages of the survey.

Table 13. Types of E2R content with which validators are most familiar.

Country	Printed	Digital	Audio	Audiovisual	Other
Spain	29	36	9	13	1
Slovenia	15	4	5	2	-
Romania	-	1	-	-	-
Germany	1	1	-	-	-
Italy	-	-	-	-	-
Total	45	42	14	15	1

The wide range of formats that validators already assess in their daily work and the fact that most of them have received training in specific fields (48% of the answers, Table 14) may explain why a slight majority of validators was not interested in additional training in other fields or types of content (Table 15). To some extent, the outcome of these questions also matches validators' account of their training as being complete for the most part (Table 16).

Table 14. Level of specialisation.

Country	General	Specific	Any Specific Field
Spain	32	26	4
Slovenia	9	6	1
Romania	-	1	1
Germany	1	-	-
Italy	-	-	-
Total	42	33	6

Table 15. Willingness to receive additional training.

Country	No	Yes	Total
Spain	30	32	62
Slovenia	10	6	16
Romania	2	-	2
Germany	-	1	1
Italy	-	-	-
Total	42	39	81

Table 16. Content missing in training.

Country	No	Yes	Total
Spain	53	9	62
Slovenia	15	1	16
Romania	2	-	2
Germany	-	1	1
Italy	-	-	-
Total	70	11	81

Not surprisingly, the majority of trained validators were familiar with validating E2R content (Table 17). Other activities with which validators were also familiar included: adapting/editing/translating texts into E2R texts, proofreading/revising E2R texts, and creating/writing E2R texts, while only a few validators were also familiar with the use of dedicated software and hardware.

Table 17. Activities which validators are more familiar with.

Country	Creating/Writing	Adapting/Editing/Translating	Validating	Proofreading/Revising	Use of Dedicated Software/Hardware	Other
Spain	15	21	60	33	7	1
Slovenia	8	13	13	-	1	1
Romania	-	-	1	1	-	1
Germany	1	1	1	1	1	-
Italy	-	-	-	-	-	-
Total	24	35	75	35	9	3

This overlapping takes place across countries, which may point to skills that are necessary for validation and yet which also needed for carrying out related tasks such as writing, adapting, or revising. Interestingly, validators from Spain, Slovenia, and Germany use dedicated software, whereas this seems not to be the case in Romania. This outcome seems coherent with the fact that Romanian validators did not mark audio or audiovisual content as being part of their validation assignments.

The questionnaire also gathered validators' accounts of their personal epistemologies in learning. The aim was to identify what type of learning activities and teaching forms have been most useful in their training biographies. The question grounds on the assumption that training programs that include tasks and activities that are known by learners help them by the construction of new knowledge.

According to the respondents (Table 18), the training activities that had been more useful for them were mainly hands-on activities, including: validation/revision/quality control, practical proofreading/revision exercises, analysing existing Easy-to-Read content, and practical adaptation/translation exercises, among others. Nonetheless, lectures were also mentioned in almost all countries and received a total number of 44 mentions, which was similar to that of, for instance, practical adaptation and translation exercises or analysing existing E2R content.

Table 18. Most useful training activities.

Country	Lectures	Practical Creation/Writing Exercises	Practical Proofreading/Revision Exercises	Practical Adaptation/Translation Exercises	Validation/Revision/Quality Control	Class Discussion Based on Errors	Analysing Existing Easy-to-Read Content	Discussing and Comparing Easy-to-Read Guidelines	Internship and Working with Experts	Other
Spain	36	31	43	39	44	35	41	37	36	1
Slovenia	7	5	9	6	8	6	6	3	-	-
Romania	-	1	-	-	1	-	-	1	1	1
Germany	1	1	1	1	1	-	-	-	1	-
Italy	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Total	44	38	53	46	54	41	47	41	38	2

When asked, trained validators stated that they had received or used handbooks for training. The data (Table 19) show that half of them had not used handbooks, while the other half provided a positive answer. The overall ratios obtained seem to match the national results.

Table 19. Use of handbooks for training.

Country	No	Yes	Total
Spain	32	30	62
Slovenia	6	10	16
Romania	2	-	2
Germany	-	1	1
Italy	-	-	-
Total	40	41	81

Lastly, the question about the number of class hours revealed that most validators (44.4%) had been trained for less than 20 h or from 20 to 40 h (Table 20).

Table 20. Hours of training.

Country	Less Than 20	20–40	40–60	More Than 60	Total
Spain	31	20	7	4	62
Slovenia	3	9	2	2	16
Romania	2	-	-	-	2
Germany	-	-	-	1	1
Italy	-	-	-	-	-
Total	36	29	9	7	81

To sum up, the responses show that validators are mainly young or middle-aged adults and that both genders are represented almost equally. Most validators seem to have completed primary or secondary education, followed by those who have received vocational training. Validators appear to actively pursue continuous learning, which in most cases is non-formal in workshops or vocational courses. This idea seems to be supported by the fact that most respondents think that they did not miss anything during training, yet half of them would like to receive additional training. The most useful training activities were hands-on activities, but also lectures, and the use of handbooks has been part of the training for about half of them. As for the types of E2R content, trained validators were familiar with printed and digital content and less with audio and audiovisual ones. Some validators also seemed familiar with tasks, such as adapting/editing/translating texts into E2R ones. Lastly, as for the length of training, the responses show that it mainly varied between less than 20 h and 20–40 h.

6.4. Current Activity

Section 4 of the survey looked into the current activity of validators. The data (Table 21) collected provide information about the tasks that validators carry out and showed that current professionals mainly work in not-for-profit and sheltered organisations, as stated in the free-text boxes.

Table 21. Work affiliation.

Country	University/ Research Institution	Public Institution	Not-for-Profit Organisation	Broadcasting Company	Freelancer	Other
Spain	-	1	42	1	-	30
Slovenia	-	5	2	-	1	12
Romania	-	5	2	-	-	-
Germany	1	-	1	-	1	-
Italy	-	-	-	-	-	-
Total	1	11	47	1	2	42

The majority of validators (76 out of 97) stated that they collaborate with or are a member of an association, mainly associations supporting people with intellectual disabilities. This outcome seems coherent with the answers obtained to the above statement.

Among validators who took the survey, 75% were trained while 25% were not. Table 22 shows an uneven distribution, with the majority of validators who took the Spanish and the Slovenian surveys being trained, and all the validators who answered the Romanian and the German surveys not being trained.

Table 22. Validators' training status.

Country	Trained	Not Trained	Total
Spain	61	9	70
Slovenia	12	6	18
Romania	-	7	7
Germany	-	2	2
Italy	-	-	-
Total	73	24	97

As expected, since validation processes are mainly carried out in teams, 72 of the answers received by validators reported that the validation of E2R content is mainly carried out in a team. In addition, 21 respondents stated that they sometimes work alone and sometimes in a team. Only four stated that they mainly work alone. In addition, it was possible to identify that the teams consist primarily of other validators (84 answers), facilitators (65 answers), and/or writers (27 answers).

When working with large documents, e.g., a novel, 57 validators stated that they work in a team and share the document with one or more validators designated by someone else (for example, the facilitator or the editor), while 29 declared that they prefer to work in a team with other validators chosen by them. Only two validators answered that they prefer not to validate the entire document with end-users of E2R.

As for the length of a validation session in a day (Table 23), the majority of validators stated that sessions usually last either less than 2 h or between 2 and 3 h, while only six validators declared that validation sessions last for more than 3 h.

Table 23. Length of a validation session in a day.

Country	Less Than 2 h	2–3 h	More Than 3 h	Total
Spain	28	36	6	70
Slovenia	10	8	-	18
Romania	4	3	-	7
Germany	2	-	-	2
Italy	-	-	-	-
Total	44	47	6	97

The use of guidelines (Table 24) was overall established in all countries investigated and most validators always use guidelines when validating E2R content.

Table 24. Frequency of use of guidelines.

Country	Always	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never	Total
Spain	51	17	1	-	1	70
Slovenia	17	-	-	-	1	18
Romania	4	-	3	-	-	7
Germany	1	-	-	-	1	2
Italy	-	-	-	-	-	-
Total	73	17	4	-	3	97

Validators who use guidelines preferred national or European guidelines (respectively, 65 and 42 answers). The explanations provided by validators about why they do not use guidelines included a lack of trust or the inadequacy of guidelines for validators, readers, or people with disabilities.

To conclude, it can be stated that the majority of validators are trained. This is especially the case in Spain, where E2R and end-users associations are well established. Conversely, the proportion of trained validators is two thirds as compared with those

from Germany and Romania, who are not trained. Nonetheless, the number of responses obtained for the latter countries was low and could not be used to make generalisations.

7. Discussion

The subset of data presented in this article aimed to put a spotlight on validators of E2R content and a research field that is still developing.

The data were gathered within the constraints of the Erasmus+ programme, however, following established scientific standards and methods. While the consortium and other institutions can use the questionnaire and the data with the same goal, it would also be interesting to triangulate the results both nationally and internationally. For instance, focus groups could be conducted to study the learning preferences of prospective students. Similarly, the same survey could be conducted addressing single groups of persons with reading and learning difficulties to then compare the collected data across their profiles (e.g., persons with dyslexia, intellectual disabilities, immigrants, persons with low literacy levels). The fact that the group of end-users of E2R content is broad underlies the need for solid knowledge about their needs and preferences [39]. This is especially important in order to create training programmes with personalised options depending on students' preferences, learning biographies, and literacies.

The data also showed how novel this field is, for they could not provide conclusive answers. Some training-related topics arising from the survey are the study of the necessary reading skills for entering the profession and to what extent these levels correlate to those described in European guidelines, such as the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. Similarly, it should be studied when specific profiles should no longer participate in validation groups. For instance, a language learner who has already acquired a B2 level of proficiency may no longer be considered an end-user of E2R content and, thus, should leave the profession and become, for instance, a facilitator or even a writer or trainer.

The terminology matter also remains unsolved. Current efforts help; however, the underlying problem seems to be the lack of agreement on the goals (e.g., maximal comprehensibility versus optimal comprehensibility) and tasks encompassing the job role.

Lastly, while the list of future research topics may suggest that the future of Easy-to-Read is not easy. At this stage, it can be said that current efforts are enabling to attract the necessary attention from scholars, professionals, and society.

8. Conclusions

The data presented in this paper showed that understanding the job role of validators of E2R content still lacks harmonisation and visibility at international and national levels. This state may partially explain the uneven participation among countries. For instance, while the understanding of validation in Spain is mainly participatory, the German responses did not seem to reflect current practice. This divergence may derive from the fact that participatory validation is primarily represented in German-speaking countries outside academia and that research is relatively new, as described in Sections 2 and 3. Nonetheless, the data shed light on the role, topic, and this incipient field of study.

Regarding the persons filling the positions of validators, the data showed that they are mainly young or middle-aged adults who work in the official language or languages spoken in their country of residence. The profession seems to be equally attractive for males and females. With regards to the age, the results seem to be similar to those collected in the LeiSA project [35], which showed that the mean age of validators was 38 years old. In both cases, Train2Validate and LeiSA, the job seems to be carried out by males and females. However, the gender distribution is more balanced in T2V, with 49 females, 47 males, and 1 person not willing to answer compared with the 20% difference identified in LeiSA: 16 females and 24 males [35].

The fact that most validators are not paid for their job, even though they are trained experts, underpins the current status of the profession. Nonetheless, this situation also may

derive from constraints of other nature, such as national legislations setting strict limits to the amount of money that a person eligible for Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) can earn additionally. Similar accounts are found in the LeiSA project at a national level.

With regards to future training programmes, the data collected provided information for the following stages in the project, i.e., the curriculum design and creation of the educational resources. The underlying idea is that understanding targeted trainees before developing a curriculum facilitates courses that match learners' technical capabilities, existing knowledge, demographics, and learning expectations [44–46]. The overall aim should be that training includes educational content and activities that resonate with the targeted students and pick them up in terms of prior knowledge, skills, and competences.

Ideally, the data collected in the project *Fachkraft Leichte Sprache* should be analysed before finalising the T2V curriculum. By doing this, T2V partners would be able to confirm some of the assumptions made from the collected data and, on the other, answers to remaining questions could be found, such as the reading skills of validators when starting the profession. However, the authors were not able to access the data yet and hope that these will be available soon.

For now, the data collected at T2V provided us with helpful information. As for validators' educational backgrounds, it can be said that it is heterogeneous, with the majority of validators having finished primary or secondary school. This evidence supports the assumption that validators have reading skills and knowledge about basic grammar in their languages when starting training or the profession. However, the data did not provide hints about the reading proficiency levels necessary for entering the profession.

As for their attitudes towards learning, validators seem to be willing to learn and develop the necessary skills and knowledge for the job. Furthermore, they are open to many different types of learning activities with a preference for hands-on and practical activities. While learning on the job seems to be common, responses did not reveal whether this is the favoured training path or, given the current lack of courses, the only one.

Validators' expertise in the subject matter includes knowledge about the E2R principles, a wide range of formats (e.g., printed, digital, audio, audiovisual) and the use of hardware (e.g., PC, tablets or smartphones) and software (e.g., Internet browsers, online dictionaries), and communication skills. The latter derives from the fact that validations often take place in groups. In this regard, validators must learn how to describe the comprehension barriers they encounter and how to cope with difficult situations, such as disagreement or rejection of personal suggestions. Lastly, as for the single tasks with which validators are familiar, they also include creating and translating E2R content. These tasks are related to the other professions involved in creating E2R materials. On the one hand, these skills enable validators to understand the process as a whole and may also open job opportunities for validators, such as co-authors or consultants in writing or translation.

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