

Non-verbal strategies, adequate settings and empathy as the real promoters of Spoken Easy Language in asymmetric communication

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ABSTRACT

The project SELSI (Spoken Easy Language for Social Inclusion), launched in 2022, focuses on simplifying language in oral contexts. Its objective is to develop adaptable recommendations for professionals to produce comprehensible content for co-participants requiring linguistic support. This paper presents findings from a SELSI survey assessing the needs and preferences of speakers across proficiency levels in oral contexts. The results highlight the necessity of non-linguistic elements in effective oral communication, including factors like a quiet setting, empathetic environments, a close rapport between interlocutors, and the strategic use of repetition to elicit accurate comprehension judgements.

KEYWORDS

Spoken Easy Language, non-verbal, asymmetric communication, intralingual translation

* Elisa Perego wrote this paper. Drago Brumen (Zavod Risa) extracted and processed the experimental data and performed the analytic calculations and the numerical simulations.

1. INTRODUCTION

Accessible and inclusive communication is a cornerstone of community cohesion, facilitating the exchange of information among participants in a given communication event. However, written and spoken texts on occasion pose as barriers, particularly when the receiver of a message encounters unfamiliar language variants or formats. This often leads to the exclusion of ordinary people from expert discourse, which they deem dysfunctional. Furthermore, these people may struggle with the comprehension of new, unexpected, or overly abundant information, especially in contexts that are stressful or unnecessarily overstimulating (Maaß 2020: 18).

Communicative exclusion can be overcome through language simplification. This process, known as intralingual translation, transmutes the source text into a target text that is equivalent but more comprehensible (García Muñoz 2014; Perego 2020; Saggion et al. 2011). Language varieties¹ that can enhance comprehension range from Plain Language to Easy Language, including several intermediate forms (Maaß 2020). Plain Language typically serves non-expert audiences, expediting access to specialised content and facilitating decision-making. Easy Language, on the other hand, strives for maximal comprehensibility through strict grammar norms, reduced language, and visual formatting benefiting individuals with cognitive or intellectual disabilities and catering to a wide variety of secondary target audiences, such as children, second-language learners, and anyone whose linguistic competence is not high enough to access standard information (Bennet 2019; Cutts 2013; Hansen-Schirra and Maaß 2020; Inclusion Europe 2009; Maaß 2020; Perego 2020; Saggion et al. 2011).

The benefits of Easy Language in enhancing comprehensibility is well-established; it has been widely adopted in European countries (Lindholm and Vanhatalo 2021), and the Anglophone world, where the quest for clarity has a long tradition and a strong cultural motivation linked to the firm belief that anyone should have the right to make informed decisions, irrespective of their literacy level (Bennet 2009, 2019; Cutts 2013; Gunning 1952, 1964; cf. the Plain English Campaign).

Although Easy Language has been researched extensively within European projects (e.g. Pathways I and II, EASIT, Train2Validate), both its research and application have predominantly focused on written communication, and most – if not all – existing guidelines instruct their readers on the best ways to write (vs. speak) clearly to ensure a smooth reading process (IFLA 2010; ILSMH 1998; Inclusion Europe 2009). This partly relates to the main applications of Easy Language, including public administration, justice, culture and education (Hansen-Schirra and Maaß 2020; Lindholm and Vanhatalo 2021; Perego 2020; Peruzzo and Rocco 2022), and, to a lesser extent, the media sector (EASIT 2019; Bernabé and Orero 2019; Maaß and

1 Christiane Maaß also refers to Plain and Easy Language as “instruments” (2020: 169); cf. Gregory and Carrol 1978 on the notion of language variety.

Hernández 2020; Perego 2020). Furthermore, the inherent ephemeral nature of spoken language poses a challenge in terms of regulation.

Nevertheless, oral communication stands as one of the most prevalent means of everyday interaction, crucial for human survival, contact with the world, and participation in society. It also plays a fundamental role in the educational process (Ali 2018). Owing to the scarcity of research in the field, which is often limited to specific countries (Leskelä 2022) or specific genres (Bernabé and Orero 2020; Hampson Lundh 2013; Trench 2018), the imperative to cover this neglected area of accessible and inclusive communication has emerged. This need has spurred the inception of the SELSI project, entirely devoted to Easy Spoken Language.

In this article, I will outline the SELSI project, its aims and its collaborative partners. I will then focus on the first research activity, Work Package 2 (WP2), elucidating the nature, structure and rationale of the online and paper questionnaire used to survey Spoken Easy Language professionals and end-users in Europe. I will then present the results of this survey, providing insights into the profiles of European SEL professionals and SEL users, along with their responses to the questionnaire.

2. THE SELSI PROJECT AND SPOKEN EASY LANGUAGE

SELSI (Spoken Easy Language for Social Inclusion) is a two-year project (2022-2024) financed by the European Union under the Erasmus+ Programme, Action Type KA220-ADU, Cooperation partnerships in adult education (www.selsi.eu). The project is coordinated by Tatjana Knapp, director of the Risa Institute. This consortium includes seven partners from five European countries (Italy, Sweden, Latvia, Lithuania, and Slovenia), each offering complementary expertise. The academic and research-oriented approach is ensured by partner universities in Italy and Lithuania, driving the academic dimension. The close connection with end-users is granted by three non-governmental organisations: Zavod Risa (the Risa Institute), the first organisation in Slovenia for the development and provision of Easy-to-Read content; Dyslexiförbundet, a Swedish disability association; and Viegļās valodas aģentūra (the Easy Language Agency), a Latvian organisation dedicated to facilitating communication between state and private entities. Lastly, RTV Slovenija (Slovenia's national public broadcasting organisation) brings its extensive experience in creating accessible audiovisual content for people with different needs.

The aim of SELSI is to investigate oral language strategies and formulate adaptable recommendations to assist professional speakers in producing comprehensible content. This content is aimed at co-participants in two-way communication or at listeners in one-way communication, i.e. individuals who require linguistic support to fully grasp the message². The primary target audience of simplified oral language

2 One-way communication is linear and limited because it occurs in a straight line from sender to receiver and serves to inform, persuade or command. Two-way communication always in-

includes people experiencing cognitive or intellectual barriers, as well as secondary target audiences, such as non-native speakers or low proficiency speakers in oral communication settings.

SELSI is organised around a series of structured activities called ‘work packages’ or WPs, with each WP led by a partner country. Its ultimate aim is to produce accessible open-access recommendations for effective Spoken Easy Language (SEL). Notably, WP2, the initial phase of the project, sought to map the requirements and resources for SEL communication in Europe, specifically in the partner and associate countries. The results of this project stage – which are the focus of this article – lay the groundwork for developing an initial set of SEL strategies for addressing end-users in need of linguistic support (WP3). These strategies will undergo pilot-testing in both online and offline learning environments to gauge their effectiveness (WP4). Finally, the SELSI strategies will be refined and integrated into a multilingual online tool, benefiting people striving to improve their SEL proficiency and effectively adapt their speech to their less proficient co-participant(s) (WP5). By including end-users, professionals and researchers in all stages of project development, SELSI forges synergies between academic research, practical application and education. In doing so, it complies with the requirements of interdisciplinary research (Orero et al. 2018) while embracing a cross-national perspective (Hoffmeyer-Zlotnik and Harkness 2005).

3. SURVEYING SEL IN EUROPE: THE SELSI QUESTIONNAIRE

WP2, led by the University of Trieste, was the starting point of SELSI, and was characterised by three main aims. First, it aimed to set the foundation for the development of SEL recommendations. Second, it sought to amplify the voices of European SEL communication stakeholders, including professionals engaged with end-users or content production, and end-users themselves – people requiring linguistic support during communication or content consumption. Lastly, it aimed to map the needs, strategies, and preferences of both SEL professionals and SEL users (SELSI 2023; *siv* veda Trevisan in questo volume).

To achieve these aims, the questionnaire was selected as the preferred research tool. Questionnaires offer the flexibility to gather specific information or opinions on a particular topic from respondents, enabling a deep understanding of their needs, preferences and satisfaction levels using a standardised set of questions. Among their crucial advantages is the capacity for large-scale data collection, standardised responses that streamline and expedite the analysis process, cost-effectiveness and replicability (e.g. McBurney and White 2013). The SELSI questionnaire was distributed online via the Web Survey Creator platform, selected for its ability to create

cludes feedback from the receiver to the sender and lets the sender know the message has been received accurately.

multilingual surveys and its advanced features for gathering and filtering results. Importantly, the questionnaire was anonymous, refraining from collecting personally identifiable information from respondents to protect their identity. Nevertheless, it enabled us to gain honest feedback and demographic information such as age, gender, education and occupational details, which was crucial in understanding and characterising the respondents. The questionnaire incorporated both open and closed questions to collect quantitative and qualitative data simultaneously. Open questions encouraged freeform responses while closed questions utilised a 3-point Likert rating scale. The questionnaire was multilingual, featuring a working template in Plain English and translations into the five project languages (Plain Italian, Plain Latvian, Plain Lithuanian, Plain Slovenian, Plain Swedish)³. The Plain Language version of the questionnaire was intended for SEL professionals, while an Easy Language version was specifically prepared in all project languages for end-users. Furthermore, the Easy Language version of the SELSI questionnaire was made available in a printable large-letter format, allowing respondents the flexibility to complete it at their convenience and ease.

Despite preparing both Plain and Easy Language versions of the questionnaire in each language, and the need for adjustments in both language and content during the translation into Easy Language, the questions posed to professionals and to end-users were largely identical. The aim of the questionnaire was to assess how frequently professionals use a given set of strategies when operating in oral settings (two-way communication) or when they produce SEL content (one-way communication). Simultaneously, it sought to gauge the extent to which end-users find the same set of strategies helpful when interacting with an interlocutor (two-way communication) or listening to spoken content (one-way communication). We explored and identified strategies, in line with Easy Language guidelines, existing literature and insights from asymmetric communication studies, which tend to improve communication efficacy and clarity. These strategies were categorised into five overarching groups: 1) Textual and conversation-enhancing strategies; 2) Linguistic strategies; 3) Non-linguistic strategies; 4) Listener-engaging strategies; and 5) Use of supporting materials (see Table 1 for details).

3 The SELSI questionnaire was also translated and made available online and in printable format in Hungarian and Spanish, thanks to the interest of scholars working in the field and belonging to the Easy Language International Network (or ELIN): Péter László Horváth, Associate Professor at the Apor Vilmos Catholic College in Vác, Hungary, and Oscar García Muñoz, Accessibility Project Manager at Plena Inclusión Madrid and coordinator of the Train2Validate Erasmus+ project, 2020-2023 (<https://plenainclusionmadrid.org/train2validate/>).

Textual and conversation-enhancing strategies	Topic explicitation
	Signpost language
	Final summary
	Additional time
Linguistic strategies	Nouns vs. pronouns
	Word repetition
	Word explanation
	Metaphors and similes
	Active vs. passive voice
	Positive vs. negative formulations
Non-linguistic strategies	Vocatives
	Louder voice
	Clear word articulation
	Pauses and slow speech rate
Listener-engaging strategies	Body language
	Asking/receiving feedback
	Familiarisers
	Terms of endearment
	Direct questions
Use of supporting material	Humour
	Anecdotes
	Pictures or photos
	Drawings
	Music or sound effect

Table 1. Strategies tested in the SELSI questionnaire grouped into five broad categories

Example 1⁴ below presents one questionnaire item belonging to the category ‘Listener-engaging strategies’. It shows some major lexical, grammatical and layout differences between the Plain Language version on the left and the Easy Language version on the right. Even when specialised terminology in the field of linguistics was retained (cf. ‘familiarised names’), examples were provided in brackets to clarify meaning and avoid ambiguity. In the Easy Language version, adherence to layout and linguistic norms was maintained (Inclusion Europe 2009). After discussions and focus groups with the SELSI

4 In the printable questionnaire, we used Verdana sans serif font, 14 points, lower case letters; we did not use italics or colour and we did not underline any portion of text (Inclusion Europe 2009: 13ff).

Advisory Board and various professionals who work with end-users, a 3-point Lickert scale was chosen to restrict response options, thereby facilitating end-users, despite its recognised lower accuracy and reliability compared to larger-scale rating scales.

<p>I use familiarised names (Tom, Tommy) to maintain a relationship with my interlocutor.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> often</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> sometimes</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> never</p>	<p>When people use my nickname to attract my attention, for me it is:</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> very helpful</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> helpful</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> not helpful</p>
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Example 1. SELSI questionnaire item in Plain and Easy English

The questionnaire was distributed by sharing a link via email or social media. To maximise participation and enhance accessibility to end-users, no password protection was created. Questionnaire distribution opened on the 6th of March, 2023 and closed on the 26th of March, 2023. All respondents were given a brief introduction to the project and the questionnaire, were briefed on the terms of participation, and received instructions for completing the questionnaire. The distribution complied with ethical research principles, using both Plain and Easy Language explicitly stating that the questionnaire was anonymous and that respondents could abandon the survey at any time without any penalty (Example 2).

TERMS OF PARTICIPATION	IMPORTANT INFORMATION
<p>All of your responses will be strictly confidential and remain anonymous in future publications and presentations.</p> <p>You have the right to abandon the survey at any time without any penalty.</p>	<p>We will never show your name.</p> <p>We will be happy if you can answer the questions.</p> <p>But you can stop and leave when you want.</p>

Example 2. Plain and Easy Language terms of participation in the SELSI questionnaire. Bold character reflects the original layout choices. Bold characters highlight important information for easy retrieval (Inclusion Europe 2009: 17)

Finally, the questionnaire was tailored and restricted to specific target groups: SEL professionals and SEL end-users. Researchers were deliberately excluded, as the focus was on individuals who participate directly in both one-way and two-way communicative settings. For professionals, the emphasis was on those who work with end-users in contexts where two-way communication occurs (e.g. adult educators primarily facilitating adult learners, speech therapists or social workers in healthcare settings), and to those who produce spoken content and operate in contexts involving one-way communication (e.g. broadcasters, media producers, voice talents, audio narrators, journalists, etc.).

Once the questionnaire closed, data was first extracted from Web Survey Creator in the form of an Excel spreadsheet. Subsequently, the project’s data analyst, Drago

Brumen (Zavod Risa), processed the data using Microsoft Power BI, transforming it into a coherent and visually effective dataset. Because the questionnaire was multilingual, the answers to the open questions were translated into English using ChatGPT in order to perform both quantitative and qualitative analysis of free-text feedback.

4. WHO ARE THE EUROPEAN SEL PROFESSIONALS AND SEL END-USERS?

The total number of completed responses was 446, with a significant representation of females (73%). The majority of respondents fell into the age range of 31 to 50 years, followed by those aged 51 to 70. Respondents were all of European origin, representing 15 different countries (Figure 1). Notably, the highest response rates were observed in the project partner countries, where the questionnaire was available in the local languages, active dissemination efforts were carried out, and direct links with stakeholders were established (cf. also ADLAB 2012; ADLAB PRO 2017a, 2017b; EASIT 2019). The most responsive partner country was Italy (30% of responses), followed by Lithuania (16%) and Latvia (13%). Conversely, fewer responses were collected in Sweden (9%) and Slovenia (9%), being smaller countries without university involvement. The considerable contribution of Spain (9%) and Hungary (9%) to the SELSI questionnaire responses reveals the power of collaborative networks in cross-national research (see also note 4; Hoffmeyer-Zlotnik and Harkness 2005; Orero et al. 2018). Notably, these countries featured researchers who actively participate in the recently established Easy Language International Network (ELIN), launched and coordinated by Tatjana Knapp (Zavod Risa).

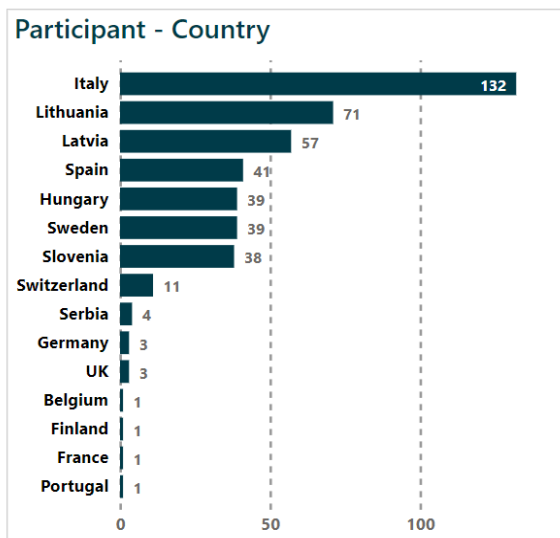


Figure 1. Overall distribution in absolute numbers of responses in European countries

Responses were collected from two distinct groups: SEL professionals (N = 266, 84% female, 52% aged 31-50) and SEL end-users (N = 180, 57% female, 46% aged 31-50).

In terms of highest degree of education achieved, 73% of the professional respondents hold a university degree, with 7% possessing a PhD. Approximately 17% of respondents held either a secondary degree or a professional qualification. End-users displayed a more diverse distribution in terms of educational background. Notably, 24% completed secondary school, while 22% possessed other types of degrees, a category that remained broad given the considerable educational diversity among participating countries. Furthermore, 14% held a university degree, 14% completed primary school and 14% had not received any formal schooling.

Among the professionals who participated in the survey, the majority (59%) worked in contexts featuring two-way communication with target groups, such as educational or healthcare settings (e.g., teacher, counsellor, speech therapist, social worker, etc.). Another 13% were adult educators directly engaged with target groups, primarily facilitating the education of adult learners within adult education organisations. Another 5% of professionals were involved in the production of oral content (e.g., broadcaster, media producer, voice talent, audio narrator, journalist, etc.), while 23% worked in other fields where adapting oral language was essential.

A qualitative analysis of the professional respondents who did not fit neatly into the predefined questionnaire categories revealed that they primarily included educators and support staff for individuals with disabilities (16%), as well as professionals in the museum and cultural sector (14%). Additionally, 14% of respondents were involved in Easy-to-Read⁵ translation and accessibility services (14%). Social service professionals represented 11% of these respondents, while a smaller percentage included writers, editors, content creators, personal assistants and support personnel, communication and marketing professionals, and healthcare professionals. Academic and librarian responses were relatively scarce. The diverse range of professionals shows that the need for simplification extends beyond the specific areas of Easy Language application, encompassing a wide array of fields where simplification is needed in order to provide accessible services and foster inclusive oral communication. Notably, the responses of professionals revealed a crucial gap: they mainly relied on Easy Language guidelines devised for written language when seeking guidance to enhance their interactions (SELSI 2023: 45-46). Consequently, comprehensive guidelines for SEL to support oral communication remain notably absent.

As far as end-users are concerned, 29% were employed, 16% were students and 15% were mainly unemployed. The majority of respondents did not fit into these pre-established categories. In fact, 39% of end-users used open-ended responses to

5 The label 'Easy-to-Read' has been used extensively in the freeform responses in the SELSI questionnaire. This points to a still traditional position held by professionals in this field, whose primary focus remains on the written medium. This stance indirectly reduces the importance of the spoken medium, which is normally perceived as more unstructured.

describe their status, revealing a majority (67.53%) who attended day centres or occupational centres. Additionally, 13% were engaged in social workshops or sheltered workshops, while 12% were retired. Some respondents (9%) attended day centres or occupational centres while also participating in activities such as proofreading or evaluation, and 8% indicated involvement in various fields, including collaboration, work, or job-seeking.

5. WHAT WE LEARNED FROM THE SELSI SURVEY RESULTS

The SELSI questionnaire offered extensive data, offering both a comprehensive European perspective of SEL stakeholder views and individual country-specific insights. These results were initially presented during the first SELSI Multiplier Event in Trieste in April 2023, and are currently synthesised in a detailed multi-authored project report (SELSI 2023). This paper will focus on a few general aspects that have emerged during the analysis, pointing to an unexpectedly strong, almost unanimous, emphasis on non-linguistic aspects of oral communication (see Junaid et al. 2018). Notably, the way in which information is conveyed orally and the contextual nuances of the communication setting seem to carry more importance than the ‘grammar’ of the spoken text itself (including lexical, syntactic and textual choices).

An examination of the responses to the questions regarding textual and conversational strategies (Table 1) revealed that most strategies associated with asymmetric communication, as documented in the literature (e.g. Berman and Chutkan 2016; Long 1983), are commonly used by professionals and valued by end-users with restricted language capacities. However, a standout finding was the consensus among end-users and professionals regarding the importance of granting additional time in conversational settings. This strategy was rated as the most helpful by end-users and also emerged as the most widely used strategy by professionals. This is supported by responses to open-ended questions (Questions 9, 10 and 16)⁶, wherein end-users consistently emphasised the importance of patience. End-users articulated their difficulties (Question 9) when confronted with poor listeners, fast or verbose speakers and people who fail to leave them enough processing and response time. Such comments included statements like, ‘I don’t like it when they are disrespectful, speak poorly to me, are impatient, have no time’, ‘Speak up. Speak patiently’ and ‘The difficult thing is for them to hear me and have patience, and for me to be understood’.

Regarding patience and additional time, when asked to express their adaptation needs (Question 10) and to explain how people should talk to them to be easily understood (Question 16), end-users indicated their preference for slow, loud and concise speech. However, most importantly, they emphasised the crucial need for attentive-

6 Respectively, ‘When people talk to you, what is difficult?’, ‘When people talk to you, how should they speak?’, and ‘Do you want to tell us other things that are helpful when you listen to someone or something?’.

ness and empathy (‘Understand my soul, my world’). Having empathy enables social connections and helps ensure optimal wellbeing. Both psychological (Ehrlich and Ornstein 2010) and linguistic empathy (Kann 2017) are the bedrock of human relationships, fostering feelings of value and care. Empathy signifies a speaker’s attitude and identification with a person or event in an utterance, creating an environment conducive to smooth and effective communication for all. Being patient and giving interlocutors sufficient time to respond involves the use of pauses in communication. These pauses afford listeners time to reflect on what is being said, form mental and emotional images, and retain information effectively. Moreover, pauses can have a calming effect on listeners, making them an invaluable tool for anyone who has to speak in public or create auditory content (Adubato 2023; Marinovich 2022) – we firmly believe that this is why the majority end-users found this strategy helpful (Figure 2). Thus, we endorse its application both in one-way and two-way communication settings and its inclusion in the forthcoming Easy Spoken Language recommendations. In contrast, speaking too quickly or loudly is linked with anger and an aggressive demeanour, disorienting and distracting end-users, delaying comprehension and response, and hindering their ability to maintain focus on the content that is being conveyed.

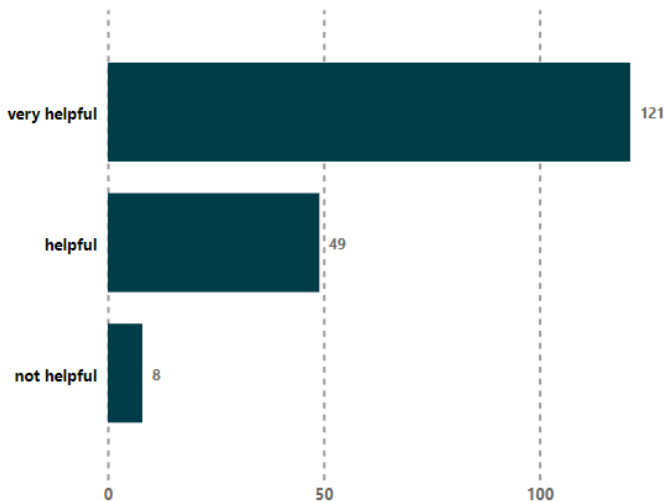


Figure 2. End-users’ answer to the question ‘When people are patient and give me a lot of time to answer, for me it is...’:

Overall, end-users’ open comments confirmed their need to be involved and be met with respect during oral interactions. These comments illuminated strategies and attitudes that were overlooked in closed-ended questionnaire items. The majority of end-users expressed a preference for non-patronising, kind and respectful interactions. One particularly revealing comment highlighted the importance of motivating

the interlocutor and preventing distraction by providing stimuli that demand attention, especially for those with short attention spans: ‘Speak clearly, not too quickly, and check if I’m following along, rather than just speaking non-stop. Ask if I understand, so I don’t start thinking about something else’. Significantly, these behaviours align with those commonly exhibited by professionals. Professionals often seek direct feedback from listeners through direct questions, give feedback using non-clausal units (e.g., ‘Oh’, ‘Okay’, ‘Yes’, etc.), and demonstrate interest through non-clausal fragments or tags (e.g., ‘Really?’) (Biber et al 1999: 1046), and employ utterance-launchers (‘You know’, ‘You see’, ‘Look’, ‘Right’) or attention-getters (‘Hey’) to encourage the co-construction of the conversation (see Biber et al. 1999: 1076). These strategies appear familiar to professionals and we believe that they are used so often due to their proven efficacy in the conversational setting (SELSI 2023: 59-60). Conversely, nicknames are almost never used by professionals as a means of maintaining a connection with listeners, and users do not find them particularly helpful, which could relate to the intrusive status of this strategy. However, the results show that users prefer their interlocutors to ask them direct questions and make them laugh to attract their attention rather than having to listen to anecdotes or personal references to their interlocutor (this is confirmed in the open answers of many end-users). This shows a preference and the possible effectiveness of listener-engaging strategies that involve directly the person who needs linguistic support and make them feel the focus of the conversation.

Eye contact, a form of non-verbal communication used to convey multiple emotions, emerged as a frequently mentioned strategy among end-users to enhance effective interaction. Interestingly, the act of looking at one’s smartphone was cited as a way to inhibit eye contact. As a fundamental factor in interpersonal relationship building (MacDonald 2009), continuous eye contact was deemed essential by some end-users, who struggled when speakers refrained from eye contact for extended periods of time. Furthermore, end-users stressed the importance of their interlocutors paying attention to them when they spoke, refraining from interruptions, allowing enough time to think, maintaining focus, and making them feel important, comfortable and at ease. These preferences clearly establish the role of an adequate communicative setting, i.e., a calm and quiet environment for effective conversation; a situation where the end-user is involved ‘and mustn’t see other people talking in front of them’. In addition, differences in communication between single versus group interactions were noted as factors influencing the type of adjustments required. Overall, according to professionals, ‘It is good to address smaller, more homogeneous groups, and individual conversations are also useful’ – a sentiment echoed by many end-users. This preference aligns with the creation of a conducive environment.

Effective communication can dramatically improve when there is a close rapport between professionals and end-users, as indicated by numerous freeform comments. End-users find it easier to interact with experts, i.e., professionals who know how to adapt their language to the interlocutor’s needs, particularly those who are familiar

with them. In such situations, end-users can ‘stay focused’ and comprehend more effectively. Likewise, professionals recognise the advantages of knowing their interlocutors well, allowing them to tailor their strategies accordingly. This is demonstrated by the following statement: ‘Depending on the type of group, I start from their context of life, interests, and the linguistic register they use, trying to establish rapport or empathy’. Overall, our results indicate professionals’ awareness of the importance of their client’s unique situation, including disabilities and background, along with their efforts to adapt their strategies in accordance. In addition, professionals emphasised the role of listening in their communication with end-users: ‘The most important thing is to listen to the person, understand them and ultimately provide all possible information that can help them’. However, even in conducive environments, end-users declare that expressing emotions and disagreeing remains their major difficulty – an area warranting future research. This is particularly significant because professionals find it equally difficult to decode or recognise the needs, thoughts and emotions of end-users, and to adapt their communication accordingly.

Although WP2 findings point to the salience of several non-verbal strategies, we wish to focus on repetition, the most interesting of the seven linguistic strategies that we have surveyed (Table 1). This strategy is linked, in part, with the need to interact in an empathetic environment. On the one hand, users appreciate repetition; on the other hand, professionals do not prioritise it as a strategy for communicating with people who face cognitive or intellectual difficulties, even if they are aware of its importance (SELSI 2023: 58). Professionals find it especially challenging to rephrase complex words and ideas that they have already simplified, with 25% maintaining that they never repeat the same idea in a sentence as a facilitating device. However, repetition is often encouraged by professionals in their interactions with end-users: ‘Sometimes I ask the conversation partner to repeat what I said and ask if they understand what I said’. This strategy is typically used to confirm the interlocutor’s comprehension. End-users tend to offer a positive answer to yes/no questions regarding their understanding, even when they fail to grasp the meaning of the message. Encouraging repetition can influence the course of the conversation, allowing more faithful and honest feedback.

As end-users have pointed out in the open-ended responses, repetition can be particularly helpful in cases of hearing loss, background noise interference, or the presence of complex or unfamiliar words that require more processing time. Referring to their interlocutor, an end-user states, ‘They need to repeat things to me twice. It’s good when I can see the other person’s lips, then it’s easier to understand what they are saying’. Similarly, another end-user said, ‘It also helps when they repeat things several times. Some words are not heard when said quietly, so it’s important to repeat them’. However, repetition is most appreciated when it is ‘short, sharp and tight’ (Carter et al. 1997: 196) – a criterion in line with the essence of an Easy and Plain Language text (Inclusion Europe 2009; Cutts 2013). This is explicated by one end-user as follows: ‘If I don’t understand, try to say it another way, as briefly and simply as possible. Sometimes someone explains what they have to say for so long that I don’t understand

it, even though it could be said much more briefly and simply'; another end-user emphasised the importance of clarity: 'many times they do not get to the point'.

Repetition, a key element in effective communication, is a favoured tool among orators because it helps to emphasise points and enhance the comprehensibility of speech (MasterClass 2022). It is a natural element of conversational grammar (Biber et al. 1999), aiding in thought structuring before articulation. Repetition also fosters familiarity, making people more open to the information that is being shared (Duncan 2021), and helps the audience remember and recognise the importance of your message, or to engage them. Repetition thereby highlights the need for prioritising paraphrasing techniques in Easy Language settings, training and future guidelines.

6. CONCLUSIONS

Intralingual translation, involving the transformation of standard and specialised language into Plain and/or Easy language, is an invaluable means of overcoming communicative exclusion in diverse settings. However, inclusive intralingual translation is traditionally examined within the realm of written communication, with limited attention paid to the vital domain of spoken language. The SELSI project, launched in 2022, is the first of its kind to focus entirely on Easy Spoken Language. In this paper, we briefly illustrated the project and selected results from its first research activity, WP2. Led by Elisa Perego and Piergiorgio Trevisan of the University of Trieste, WP2 aims to survey and map the needs and preferences of both SEL professionals and SEL end-users via a multilingual online and paper questionnaire. The results of the survey highlight a crucial revelation: effective communication in an oral environment transcends the mere adaptation of the message to the well-known Easy Language recommendations. Indeed, non-linguistic aspects of oral interaction play a pivotal role in asymmetric communication dynamics. End-users, i.e., less proficient co-participants in oral communication, demonstrate improved understanding when specific conditions are met. These conditions include sufficient time for information processing, fostering a sense of involvement and importance within the conversational setting, maintaining a tranquil or focused setting, and exhibiting patience, psychological and linguistic empathy, constant eye contact and a willingness to receive feedback, particularly on the part of expert interlocutors. However, even in conducive environments, there remain areas where end-users encounter challenges, such as expressing ones' emotions and disagreeing with their interlocutors. This observation highlights the need for future research to explore these aspects in greater detail. In sum, WP2 results confirm the effectiveness of certain established Easy Language strategies. At the same time, they shed light on additional factors that warrant consideration and inclusion in the SELSI recommendations for facilitating easy oral communication, which are currently in the process of development.

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