

EASY LANGUAGE IN THE CONTEXT OF MODERN PEDAGOGY

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ABSTRACT

The idea of language simplification roots back to the beginning of the 18th century, and the significance of understandable and accessible information has gradually increased. Although Easy language development is closely linked to the Plain Language Movement, these are two distinct concepts.

Easy language is present in Latvia since the 1990-s; however, its development is still insufficient. Although Easy language is primarily meant for adults, it can be useful for children, too. Moreover, it can provide significant support in both general and special education. Nevertheless, teachers' understanding of Easy language as a tool and their ability to deliberately apply it is presumably low. Therefore, the aim of the study is to find out whether teachers in Latvia are familiar with the concept of Easy language, how often and what materials in Easy language they use, and how important Easy language, or in other words understandable outlining principles are in the teaching and learning process.

To fulfil the tasks of the study, a bibliographic research method was applied, describing the previous research in the field as well as published teaching resources in Easy Latvian. To explore teachers' attitudes and knowledge of Easy Latvian, the quantitative method was used – i.e., an anonymous online questionnaire for general and special education teachers was created. The questionnaire had 500 eligible respondents.

The study showed that information about Easy language in Latvia is insufficient, and the concept itself is still linked to a stigma. Nevertheless, teachers are willing to learn more about Easy language, and one third of the questionnaire respondents believe that teachers should be trained during their studies. Besides developing new materials and offering training opportunities, significant attention should be paid to promoting each Easy language-related activity.

Keywords: *accessible education, Easy language, general education, special education, teachers' attitudes*

Introduction

The idea of language simplification roots back to the beginning of the 18th century, when Swedish King Charles XII passed an ordinance: “His Majesty the King requires

that the Royal Chancellery in all written documents endeavor to write in clear and plain Swedish and not to use, as far as possible, foreign words” (Ehrenberg-Sundin, 2004). Sweden was also the place where Easy language started its development and later spread across Europe – it has been promoted since the late 1960s (Bohman, 2021: 528).

Although Easy language development is closely linked to the Plain Language Movement (ibid.), these are two distinct concepts. Plain language, also called ‘layman’s terms’, is “simple language that anyone can understand” (Merriam-Webster). American lexicographer Bryan Garner says: “Plain English is typically quite interesting to read. It’s robust and direct – the opposite of gaudy, pretentious language. You achieve plain English when you use the simplest, most straightforward way of expressing an idea. You can still choose interesting words. But you’ll avoid fancy ones that have everyday replacements meaning precisely the same thing” (Garner, 2013: 14). Plain language has a broad target audience and ensures a shorter time for reading and a clearly understandable message. It delivers all the information without exploiting complicated constructions, specific terminology, and exaggerated lexicon.

Easy language, on the other hand, has a narrower, but more diverse target audience – “it is aimed at people who find it difficult to understand standard language” (Lindholm, Vanhatalo, 2021: 11). It is deliberately and often heavily simplified on all levels: content, grammar, lexicon (ibid.: 19). Easy language delivers only the most important information, and besides language-related requirements, the visual modalities such as the font, letter size, line spacing, and pictures are also of paramount importance. The most important reason for creating a text in Easy language is information accessibility for people with perceptual disorders or temporal need for simpler language. Thus, normally, an Easy language text is also validated in the target audience.

Although Easy language is considered to be a tool for adults, its principles can be also applied to children and incorporated into the teaching process. In Latvia, seven Easy language target groups have been determined: people with intellectual disabilities, people with psychosocial disabilities, people with dyslexia, people with hearing impairment or loss, people after a stroke or brain injuries, seniors, and immigrants (Anča et al., 2021). All of these except seniors can apply to both adults and children.

“Easy language is meant for people with learning disabilities, including disabilities that used to be called intellectual development disorders” (Sproģe, Tūbele, 2021: 491). Easy language has been used in special education schools, but with changes in Easy language target groups in European regulations, its significance increases also in general education (Anča, Meļņika, 2021). Yet “the inclusion of people with disabilities in education is still problematic and suffers [...] general inequalities in the achievement of high educational qualifications. [...] People suffering from sensory and learning disabilities often have limited literacy, are under-educated, and can only access content successfully if it is specifically adapted to their needs. Enhancing the potential of this large population group and giving it the means to function properly and contribute to society is in order” (Perego, 2021: 276).

In special education, Easy language principles are of use as the teaching materials are developed according to the children’s individual needs. Following the principles helps

create a text understandable to a child. “Pupils with intellectual development disorders are the group that requires the most attention, as they have no use for learning materials that are in no way adapted” (Sproģe, Tūbele, 2021: 493). Professor Sarmīte Tūbele claims that materials for children with intellectual disabilities should be easy-to-perceive and understandable, which means they can be considered as written in Easy language (Tūbele, 2021). However, since the first Easy Latvian guidelines were published just one and a half year ago, special education teachers base the materials on their teaching experience, not complex interdisciplinary research combining education, neurolinguistics, psycholinguistics, and sociology (Liepa, Polinska, 2021: 5). Dr. Dina Bethere points out that there is even no specific research carried out on Easy language and education (Bethere, 2021). The first description of Easy and Plain languages in a scientific, multidisciplinary context in Latvia was created in 2021 by professors Ieva Sproģe and Sarmīte Tūbele (Sproģe, Tūbele, 2021: 488).

Since 2020, Easy Language Agency offers a short introductory course for the teachers of the Latvian language “Easy Language as a Tool for Teachers in Creating Inclusive Study Environment and Providing Accessible Curriculum” (valoda.lv). In 2020, 29 teachers completed the training, and the number over the years is growing. Still, the 12-hour course can provide only a general insight into Easy language, and “adapting a complicated text or [...] making it easy to read is truly not simple” (Sproģe, Tūbele, 2021: 495). Thus, each teacher after completing the course should develop their skills in practice, which again requires additional resources and deepened interest of the person itself.

Nevertheless, there are several useful books and exercise books for children with perceptual disorders and learning difficulties published in Latvia. Significant is the work of Gaisma Special Education Boarding Primary School teachers Aelita Žučkova, Dagnija Rubiķe, and Ilona Laizāne – since 2001, they have developed a book series for children on important everyday topics: “Esmu tīrs” (“I am Clean”), “Mans apģērbs” (“My Clothing”), “Mana istaba” (“My Room”), “Es ārpus mājas” (“Outside my Home”), “Mana nauda” (“My Money”), “Es jau varu!” (“I Already Can!”), “Esmu tīrs un kārtīgs” (“I am Clean and Tidy”)¹. In 2003, the society *Papardes Zieds* published three books on sexual education for adolescents: “Ieva”, “Aleksis”, and “Ieva un Aleksis”.

Recently, the National Center for Education (NCE) has contributed to study materials in Easy language. In 2021, by the order of the NCE within the European Social Fund (ESF) project “Competency-based approach in the curriculum”, Liepāja University’s team developed a series of teaching resources for pupils with severe intellectual disabilities for integrative learning of Latvian, Natural sciences, Social sciences, and Design and technologies. The series includes five sets of books and exercise books for pupils from the 1st to 9th grade: Latvian and Natural sciences; Natural sciences, Latvian, Social sciences, and Mathematics; Latvian and Social sciences; Mathematics and Social sciences; Design and technologies, Natural sciences, and Social sciences (LiepU, 2021: 2). Although not labelled as such, the resources are based on Easy language principles regarding language use as

¹ For the full list of the books and exercise books developed in the school, visit: <https://www.gaismasskola.lv/par-mums/pedagogu-atbalsta-centrs/latvija/>

well as visual modalities – larger fonts, clear pictures, reduced amount of information on a page, etc.

In 2022, within the project “Competency-based approach in the curriculum”, NCE launched the first materials labelled as resources in Easy language with the disclaimer that the main target group for these materials is pupils with dyslexia, dysgraphia, and dyscalculia; the secondary target groups are pupils with the migration background and pupils whose native language is not Latvian – from the 7th to 9th grade (Skola2030). Therefore, the resources cover only two Easy language target groups and 3 grades out of 12.

The project is still ongoing, and the teaching resources will be adapted for the following subjects: Latvian, Latvian in minority education, Social sciences, Latvian and world history, Visual arts, Literature, Chemistry, Physics, Biology, Geography, Mathematics, Design and technologies, Computer sciences, Engineering sciences, and Sports and health. Currently, less than half of the results have been published (Skola2030).

Although the concept of Easy language has been present in Latvia since 1990-ies, its development has not been sufficient. There are very few published materials and notwithstanding Easy language usefulness, the concept itself is linked to stigmas. While new materials are still being elaborated on, teachers could apply their own Easy language knowledge to facilitate the study process as “accessible informational content is needed, in a large variety of situations, for people with or without disabilities or impairments” (Simon et al., 2022: 61). However, teachers’ understanding of Easy language as a tool and their ability to deliberately apply it is presumably low. Therefore, the aim of the study is to find out whether teachers in Latvia are familiar with the concept of Easy language, how often and what materials in Easy language they use, and how important Easy language, or in other words understandable outlining principles are in the teaching and learning process.

Methodology

For this article, the bibliographic research method was applied, describing the previous research in the field as well as published teaching resources in Easy Latvian. From the perspective of sociolinguistics, the study looks at language use in society and language as a tool to provide an inclusive environment. In the context of pedagogy, the study provides an insight into the use of accessible information and understandable communication not only in special education but in education in general as today’s society aims toward inclusive classrooms. In such a case, Easy language and its principles become a meaningful tool for teachers and a significant aid for pupils.

To explore teachers’ attitudes and knowledge of Easy Latvian, the quantitative method for the study was selected. To clarify the necessary information, an anonymous online questionnaire for general and special education teachers was created. The questionnaire consisted of 9 questions about the use of Easy language in education. The questionnaire was active for two weeks, and it was distributed on social media and via email.

After indicating the branch of education (general or special) they work at, the teachers were asked whether they know what Easy language is. If the respondent was familiar with the concept, they were guided through 6 questions to share their opinion on Easy language usefulness in general and special education and their experience with resources in Easy language, including those of the NCE. Respondents who were not familiar with the concept were directed straight to question 8 asking about the respondent's preferred channels of learning about Easy language. Finally, the respondents were asked to evaluate the importance of the following eight principles in teacher's work (using a scale from 1 to 4, where 1 – not important at all, 2 – not very important, 3 – quite important, and 4 – very important): to explain the tasks in an understandable manner, to teach the pupil to divide the task into smaller tasks, to encourage the pupil to concentrate on one activity at a time, to be able to rephrase if a pupil has difficulty to understand, to avoid complicated foreign words, to complement the study material with pictures, and to use grammatically correct language. These principles form the base of Easy language (Liepa, Polinska, 2021), but that was not explicitly announced to the respondents. The questionnaire was conducted in compliance with all ethical principles.

Results

The questionnaire was answered by 538 respondents. 38 respondents were excluded from the analysis: 20 respondents were professional education teachers, 6 were higher education teachers, and 12 respondents represented other educational directions: diaspora (1), Montessori (1), tutoring (2), adult education (2), social educator without specifying the type of education (2), music therapy (1), speech therapy (1), and students (2). The excluded data could be considered representative.

Of the eligible respondents, 340 were general education (GE) teachers and 160 worked in special education (SpE). The reduced number of the latter is explained by the overall number of teachers in Latvia – in the school year 2021/2022, there were 26 386 general education teachers and only 1894 special education teachers (VIIS).

The respondents were asked whether they know what Easy language is. Almost a quarter of the respondents ($n = 115$; where 99 were GE teachers and 16 were SpE teachers) had never heard of it, and a similar amount ($n = 119$; 89 GE, 30 SpE) had heard of the term but did not know what it means. 20% of the respondents ($n = 98$; 81 GE, 17 SpE) claimed they knew what Easy language is but did not use it, and 34% of the respondents ($n = 166$; 72 GE, 94 SpE) were familiar with the concept and used it in their work. The percentage ratio of respondents' awareness of the concept is shown in Figure 1 below.

Questions 3 to 7 were asked only to those respondents who were familiar with Easy language ($n = 266$). First, teachers were asked whether Easy language principles can facilitate the teaching and learning process. An absolute majority (90%, $n = 240$) answered that every student sometimes needs information in Easy language, 9% ($n = 23$, 20 GE, 3 SpE) claimed that this can be helpful only for pupils in special education, and 1% ($n = 3$; 1 GE, 2 SpE) believed that Easy language cannot be of help in school.

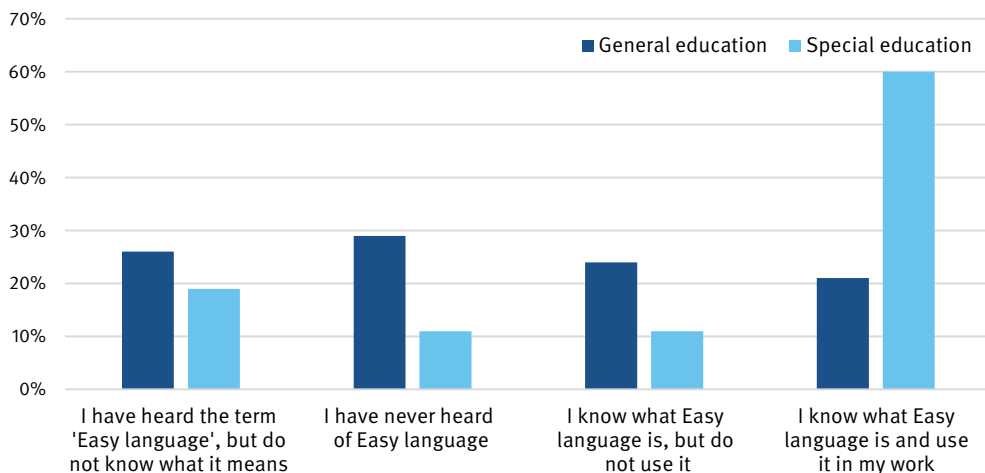


Figure 1 Respondents' ($n = 500$) awareness of Easy language in general and special education

Question 4 clarified the use of Easy language materials at school. 38% ($n = 101$; 55 GE, 45 SpE) claimed that each teacher creates their own resources, 26% ($n = 70$; 19 GE, 51 SpE) share their experience and materials with colleagues, 11% ($n = 29$; 26 GE, 3 SpE) do not use Easy language resources due to lack of knowledge, and 20% ($n = 52$; 41 GE, 11 SpE) do not have time to prepare them. 5% ($n = 12$) chose the answer "Other", indicating different individual experiences such as "others do not have the desire to participate", "Easy language depletes language and hinders the development of deepened creative thinking", "Our school provides materials in Easy language for the teachers", "I do not use resources in Easy language in order not to lower the quality", "there is no need in our school for such resources", "I sometimes use Easy language to speak with parents".

Question 5 asked particularly about the use of the materials developed within the project "Competency-based approach in the curriculum"/Skola2030, leading to Question 6 or Question 7 if Question 5 was answered with 'no' or 'yes' respectively. Of 266 teachers, 204 (121 GE, 83 SpE) did not use the mentioned materials, which means the prepared resources used less than a quarter, or 24% ($n = 62$; 32 GE; 33 SpE). Asked to specify the reason for not using the materials (Q6), 35% ($n = 72$; 49 GE, 23 SpE) did not know such materials existed, 7% ($n = 14$; 8 GE; 6 SpE) claimed the materials are not useful or are of bad quality, 16% ($n = 33$; 30 GE, 3 SpE) said there are no target group children in their school or class, 27% ($n = 54$; 24 GE, 30 SpE) acknowledged that the materials are suited for pupils of another age group, and 15% ($n = 31$; 11 GE, 20 SpE) answered with the option "Other", 5 of them specifying that the materials are not suited for pupils with severe intellectual disabilities or non-verbal pupils, 3 specifying that the materials still need to be adapted for their pupils, and other answers included claims as "I have not learned to use them meaningfully", "there are no materials for my subject", "finding the materials [in the system] takes too much time", "the access to the materials is very obscure and complicated, and the information is scarce".

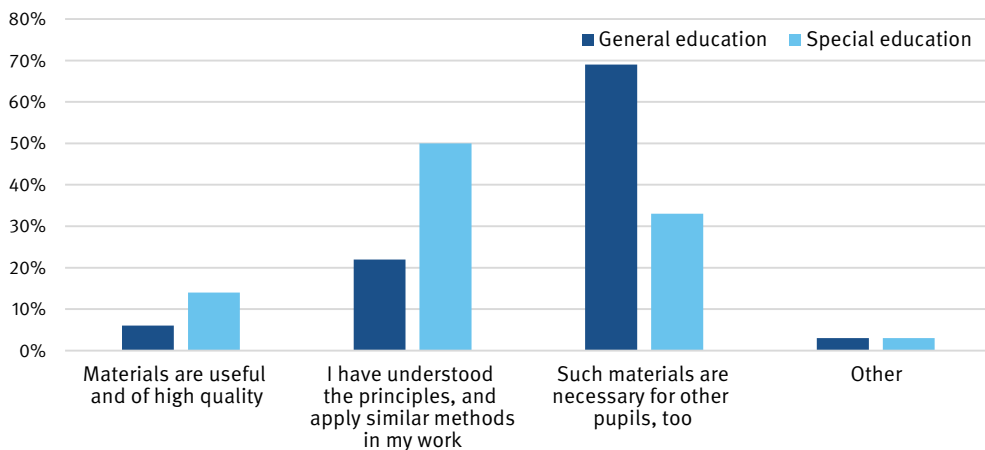


Figure 2 Respondents' ($n = 62$) opinion about Skola2030 materials in Easy language for pupils with dyslexia, dysgraphia, dyscalculia

The remaining 62 teachers, who used Skola2030 materials, were asked to share their opinions about the materials' quality (Q7). 10% ($n = 6$; 2 GE, 4 SpE) said that materials are useful and of high quality, 36% ($n = 22$; 7 GE, 15 SpE) claimed that they have used the materials to understand the principles, which are then applied in teachers' work, 52% ($n = 32$; 22 GE, 11 SpE) acknowledged that other pupils would need such materials, too, and 3% ($n = 2$) chose the answer "Other", specifying that the materials are of poor quality (1 GE) and that they complement the Skola2030 resources with their own (1 SpE). The percentual ratio for the answers in the general education group and special education group is shown in Figure 2.

Q8 asked all respondents ($n = 500$) where they would like to learn more about Easy language. The option "such information should be included in higher education curricula for teachers" was chosen by 27% ($n = 134$) of respondents, 45% ($n = 228$) claimed they would willingly attend a course to learn Easy language principles, 17% ($n = 86$) would rather choose reading an Easy language handbook, and 4% ($n = 18$; 16 GE, 2 SpE) did not want to know anything about Easy language. 7% of respondents ($n = 34$) selected the option "Other", often indicating that they cannot answer the question if they do not know what Easy language is. Other answers included explanations such as "I have no specific preferences [for learning Easy language]", "I would read the information on the Internet", "I would watch a YouTube video on Easy language", "I would not like that society becomes blunt, unable to think, with unsteady attention, which unfortunately has been observable during the last decade."

The final question (Q9) asked the respondents to evaluate the importance of eight basic Easy language principles in teachers' work without explicitly indicating that the mentioned principles are of Easy language. The majority of the respondents acknowledged that all eight principles are quite important or very important, with these answers ranging from 94% (the principle of avoiding complicated foreign words) to 100% (the principle of explaining the tasks in an understandable manner). 8% ($n = 41$; 33 GE, 7 SpE) evaluated the principle of **explaining the tasks in an understandable manner**

as quite important, while 92% ($n = 459$; 307 GE, 152 SpE) marked it as very important. The principle of **teaching the pupil to divide a task into smaller tasks** was marked as very important in 63% ($n = 315$; 199 GE, 116 SpE) of cases, quite important in 36% ($n = 179$; 136 GE, 113 SpE), not very important in 1% ($n = 5$; 5 GE, 0 SpE) of cases, and 1 respondent (SpE) marked it as not at all important. An equal number of overall respondents (48%; $n = 238$) evaluated the principle of **encouraging the pupil to concentrate on one activity at a time** as quite important (172 GE, 66 SpE) or very important (150 GE, 88 SpE), whereas 4.4% ($n = 22$; 16 GE, 6 SpE) evaluated it as not very important, and 2 respondents (GE) – as not at all important. The **ability to rephrase if a pupil has difficulty to understand** was recognized as very important by 86% ($n = 430$; 285 GE, 145 SpE) of respondents, as quite important by 13% ($n = 66$; 52 GE, 14 SpE), as not very important by 0.6% ($n = 3$; 3 GE, 0 SpE), and as not at all important by 1 respondent (SpE). 85% ($n = 426$; 290 GE, 136 SpE) claimed that **creating a logical and structured outline** is very important, 14.6% ($n = 73$; 49 GE, 24 SpE) claimed that it is quite important, whereas 1 respondent claimed it is not very important (GE). 54% ($n = 268$; 165 GE, 103 SpE) said that it is very important to **avoid complicated foreign words**, 40% ($n = 201$; 152 GE, 49 SpE) evaluated it as quite important, 5% ($n = 27$, 20 GE; 7 SpE) marked this principle as not very important, whereas 1% ($n = 4$; 3 GE, 1 SpE) said it is not at all important. 64% ($n = 322$; 200 GE, 122 SpE) of the respondents consider **complementing the study materials with pictures** being very important, 32% ($n = 162$; 131 GE, 31 SpE) as being quite important, 3% ($n = 15$; 8 GE, 7 SpE) considered the principle as not very important, and 1 respondent (GE) – not at all important. Finally, 76% ($n = 381$; 260 GE, 121 SpE) and 22% ($n = 109$; 73 GE, 36 SpE) claimed that **using grammatically correct language** is very important and quite important respectively, and 2% ($n = 10$; 7 GE, 3 SpE) marked it as not very important principle.

The data for all eight principles overall are represented in Figure 3 below.

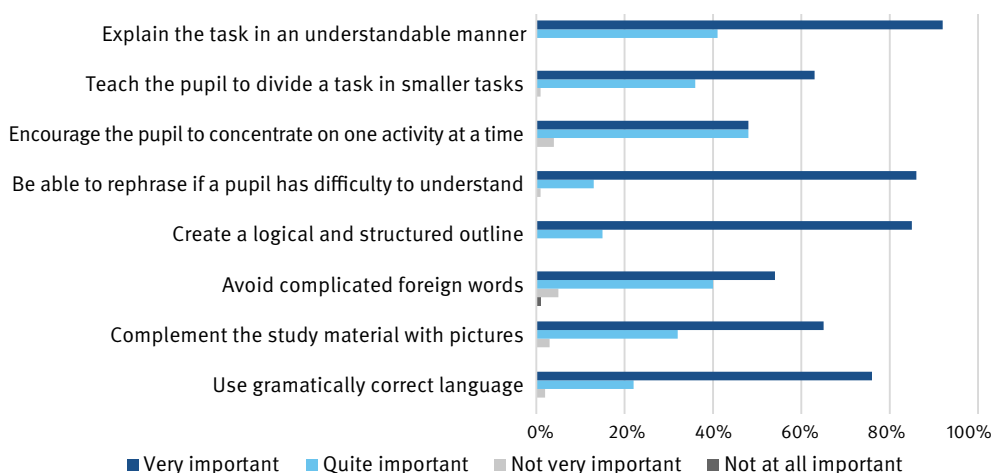


Figure 3 Respondents' ($n = 500$) level of agreement with the importance of eight basic Easy language principles in teachers' work

Discussion

The first question highlighted that almost a quarter of the teachers had never heard of Easy language, and a similar amount have heard the term without understanding it. 20% of the respondents who were familiar with Easy language had not found it useful in their classrooms, and that might suggest of narrow presumptions, which from one point of view is supported by the claims later in the questionnaire that “Easy language depletes language and hinders the development of deepened creative thinking” and “I do not use resources in Easy language in order not to lower the quality”. Noteworthy that special education teachers were more aware of the concept, and 60% used Easy language in the study process, while in general education so did only 21% of teachers.

The vast majority of the respondents who knew what Easy language is acknowledged that every student at some point needs information in Easy language, which corresponds to the results of the comparative study on Easy language acceptance in the participating countries of the project “Promoting Easy Language for Social Inclusion” – the study showed that 59% of the inhabitants of Latvia believe that Easy language can be necessary for every person, and 87% recognized that they at some point of their lives have had difficulties understanding the presented text (PERLSI, 2022: 12–13).

Answers to Question 4 highlight the lack of knowledge and time to adapt the resources for pupils in need. Nevertheless, teachers’ willingness to share their experience with their colleagues (70 teachers, or 26% of those who were familiar with Easy language, 14% of all respondents) should be commended.

Responses on the use of Skola2030 resources point out that developing the materials is not sufficient and promoting the resources is as significant as preparing them. Only 62 teachers (12% of the respondents, 23% of the teachers familiar with Easy language) had used the prepared materials, and one third of the rest indicated that they did not know about these resources. Q6 also showed the necessity to cover other target groups as about one fourth of the respondents recognized that materials are suited for another age group, and there were several teachers who acknowledged that the resources are not of use for pupils with severe intellectual disabilities or non-verbal pupils. This corresponds to Q7, where half of the respondents chose to tick the answer “Such materials are necessary for other pupils, too”. Q7 marks another tendency – teachers used the prepared materials to understand the principles and then chose to develop their own materials instead of using the ready ones, which confirms the idea of insufficient overall knowledge of Easy language set out at the beginning of the article.

Q8 reveals teachers’ interest to learn more about Easy language – only 4% ($n = 18$) claimed they do not want to know anything about Easy language, while 27% believed that every teacher-to-become should be trained in Easy language while studying, and 46% expressed their readiness to attend a course on Easy language. The answers also reflected the recent tendency to learn remotely and independently as 17% would choose reading guidelines and several teachers would willingly use the information published on the Internet.

The final question showed that actually, all basic Easy language principles are of paramount importance in every classroom and that Easy language is not something very narrow or specific. In the questionnaire, the principles were deliberately left without the claim of being Easy language basis to encourage the respondents to evaluate them as such. There is a possibility that marking them as Easy language principles would gather different results, but such an option should be evaluated in further research on attitudes. It is noteworthy that every question in the questionnaire from different angles reflected the lack of information, while some answers also revealed still existing stigma. Nevertheless, combining the desire to teach the pupils in the most effective way with an ability to deliberately apply Easy language as a tool when that might be of use, could provide a useful aid in achieving the best results in every classroom regardless of whether it is a general or special education class.

Conclusions

- Only half of the survey respondents know what Easy language is, and only 34% use it in their work, mainly special education teachers.
- The stigma that Easy language can lower academic achievements and that it depletes the language as well as hinders creative thinking is still present.
- The majority of teachers are willing to learn more about Easy language, and almost one third believe that it should be included in the university curricula.
- Resources in Easy language are necessary for different target groups. Taking into account the prolonged period of preparation and the wide variety of target groups, it would be more efficient to train teachers so that they are able to effectively apply Easy language principles and themselves prepare materials necessary exactly for their pupils.
- Significant attention should be paid to the promotion of the prepared resources as well as Easy language as such – first, to reduce the existing stigma, second, to justify the funding invested in the field, and third, to provide a useful tool for facilitating the teaching and learning process.

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