

THE PRACTICE AND THE TRAINING OF TEXT SIMPLIFICATION IN ITALY

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Abstract – This paper reports on a subset of survey data to illustrate the status, the educational and the professional background of the Italian experts in the production of Easy-to-Understand (E2U) content. It opens with a definition of E2U in relation to the established terms Easy-to-Read Language and Plain Language, which are discussed and exemplified through examples in English, and it illustrates the European project EASIT on the implementation of E2U in the audiovisual context. After that, the paper focuses on the Italian situation regarding E2U training and practice as emerged from the answers to a survey of 19 experts. Results show that the Italian situation does not differ substantially from the general European situation as far as the (solid and varied) educational and professional background of the experts is concerned, as well as the still scant training opportunities that are offered and the limited involvement of academia in training. On the other hand, some specificities of the Italian situation do emerge, such as the dominance of theory over practice both in training and on the job, and an unbalanced implementation of E2U content which abounds in the area of education and overlooks other crucial areas of communication. The results of the Italian survey point to the need for more consistent and systematic training as well as to the need for more awareness-rising as far as communicative integration and inclusion through content simplification are concerned.

Keywords: Easy-to-Read Language; Plain Language; Simplification; Training; Easy-to-Understand Language; Accessible Communication; Italy.

1. Introduction

The growing attention for cultural and communicative inclusion and integration in Europe has recently resulted in a number of funded projects exploiting and focusing on the potentials of language and of audiovisual translation (AVT). The recently funded EASIT project, launched on the 1st of September, 2018, tackles the issue through the attempt to apply simplified (or Easy-to-Understand, henceforth E2U) language in the form of Easy-to-Read (E2R)¹ and Plain Language (PL) to some specific AVT services, such as subtitling and audio description, as well as to the AV news sector. The implementation of E2U language in the AVT field is new, and this is the reason why the EASIT project was planned to include an opening stage that aimed at understanding how and where E2U is already practiced in Europe.

In this paper, after giving a brief working definition of E2U language, I will describe the project and its activities. Then, I will focus on the results of the first project “working package” carried out to gather data on the current situation regarding E2U

¹ In this paper, the traditional label “Easy-to-Read” will be used even though “Easy Language” was recently added to it, and in some cases it is starting to substitute it. Easy Language is in fact a more comprehensive label, comprising content that is not necessarily meant to be read (e.g. audio descriptions or audio content for the blind, but also tourist audio guides, podcasts, pre-recorded instructional messages, etc.) even if it needs to be made more comprehensible (Maaß 2020).

training, practice and implementation in Europe. In particular, I will extract and concentrate on the data gathered in the Italian context.

Relying on a sociological approach (Berneking 2017; Zheng 2017) and on previous studies that applied this approach to the AVT field (ADLAB PRO 2017a, 2017b; Perego in press; Perego, Pavesi 2006; Pavesi, Perego, 2008), I will focus on the professional figures currently working in the Italian E2U area in order to illustrate their demographics, their educational and professional background, the extent and the nature of their experience, their training context and their current working practice. This will enable me to profile the Italian E2U expert, and to highlight areas where Italy is in line with Europe and areas where it has its own specificities.

2. Easy-to-Understand Language

Today in Europe the implementation of E2R and PL is very diverse in different EU countries (Fortis 2003, pp. 8-11). For nonexperts, it is still easy to mix the two language variants because both aim at text understandability and intelligibility via more or less substantial interventions on lexicon, sentence structure, text and content organization, and page layout, and it is sometimes easier to spot similarities rather than differences between the two modalities. However, E2R and PL differ considerably in terms of levels of simplification (with the former representing the maximal language and content simplification form) and target audience (Bredel, Maaß 2016; CHANGE 2016; Degener 2016; Department of Health 2016; Fortis 2003; IFLA 2010; Inclusion Europe 2014; Matausch, Nietzio 2012; Maaß 2020; MENCAP 2016; Nietzio *et al.* 2014; Perego 2020; Piemontese 1996; Plain English Network 2000; Sciumbata 2017; Tronbacke 1997).

The following example can help us to understand at least the major mechanisms of PL and E2R Language. We can observe that the more the text is simplified, the longer it can get (see Table 1 for quantitative data). In the E2R translation, the message that is delivered in a highly compressed way in the original text taken from *The Guardian* is completely unpacked and delivered in stages, using simple words (to ease > to make less severe), definitions (Infectious means that the disease transmits easily to people), and graphic devices (boldening) to mark new or difficult words. References are repeated and nominal references are preferred to pronominal forms. Several sentences are used, each starting on a new line and containing only one idea. While the E2R text does not take anything for granted, the PL text – which stands midway between easy and standard or sectorial language – still relies on some background knowledge on the part of the end user, but offers a more explicit text based on simpler syntax.

Original newspaper title	Plain Language version	Easy-to-Read Language version
Coronavirus: more new cases in China as parts of Europe ease restrictions	The new infectious disease Coronavirus is spreading again in China. This is happening while other countries in the world are making restrictions gradually less severe.	Coronavirus is a type of virus. Viruses cause diseases. Coronavirus is a new disease. This disease is infectious . Infectious means that the disease transmits easily to people. China is presenting many new cases of Coronavirus. In some countries around the world, the situation is different. In these countries,

		the measures that control what people do are less strict.
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Example 1

Translation of a newspaper title (*The Guardian*, 11/05/2020) into Plain and E2R Language.

There is no unique and right way to translate a standard text into a Plain or an E2R text. Example 1 just illustrates options that can be further adapted depending on the target users, on the context of use of the translated texts and on their communicative scope. Overall, as I mentioned, text simplification tends to come with an increased number of words, due to the need to explain each concept with simple words and structures. The quantitative analysis of these texts (Table 1) shows that simplification corresponds to a substantial increase in number of words and sentences, and to a (desirable) decrease in lexical density, as well as to a consequent increased readability of the E2R text. The increase in long words in the E2R text is linked to the decision to maintain some technical words which however are defined and repeated, thus lowering their possible negative impact on the end user.

	Original newspaper title	Plain Language version	Easy-to-Read Language version
Word count	12	25	58
Sentence count	1	2	8
Character count (no spaces)	62	143	311
Complex word count (3 or more syllables)	2	5	9
Average word length	5.08 (3.29)	5.64 (3.05)	5.19 (2.87)
Average sentence length	12	12.5 (3.54)	7.25 (3.37)
Readability (Gunning fog index)	11.47	13	9.11
Lexical density	75%	64%	56.9%

Table 1

Quantitative measures for the standard, PL and E2R texts analyzed. Standard deviation in brackets.

In terms of end users, while E2R is primarily meant for people with reading difficulties and with cognitive and intellectual disabilities, PL aims to include as many readers as possible, including experts, through clear and effective communication (Fortis 2003; Maaß 2020). The two modalities normally have different fields of application: E2R Language mainly applies to daily life information, i.e., news, rights and obligations, access to services, transport, information for consumers and information on leisure time, health-related information (Freyhoff *et al.* 1998), and it is meant to make people with intellectual disabilities more independent. For instance, the E2R self-help guide for depression for people living with a learning disability created by the CWP NHS Foundation Trust opens with a definition of depression that is delivered through seven key phrases (No interest in things; Low mood; Thoughts of death; Thinking bad about yourself; No energy; Feeling guilty; Hard to think) enclosed in coloured bubbles and accompanied by the image of a crying lady. On the next page, the answer to the question “Is it normal to feel depressed?” starts with the following large-print, wide-spaced text: “Everybody can feel down or low sometimes. One out of four people get depressed. Depression can happen to anyone”. It goes on with more straightforward simple sentences, and the image of a sad veiled woman. The information is clear and direct, but not overwhelming in terms of amount of content and in terms of layout. Each page of the 17-page leaflet focuses on an aspect of depression, which is described preferably through key words ordered using bulleted

points, images that serve to enhance understanding, and moves that aim at actively involving the reader (e.g., [Write down] What you can do to try to stop negative thoughts).

PL, on the other hand, is used mainly in specialized fields, such as the bureaucratic, administrative or legal fields, with the purpose of simplifying sectorial lexicon to make the documents comprehensible to the greatest number of people. Its realization is different and it pays less attention to the non-verbal codes that are typically used in E2R. For instance, the 2017 publication by the National Adult Literacy Agency shows through some case studies that in the legal sector unclear communication can lead to misinterpretation, confusion, errors, and disputes. The strategies to fix this include the substitution of legal words and phrases (such as “to annul” or “duress”, cf. page 32) with plain words (such as “to cancel” and “pressure”). The demand for Plain English in the legal sector is in fact growing to reduce mistakes and complaints, to enable people to make informed choices and also to increase the likelihood of complying with the law.

Given their nature, E2R and PL cannot be used interchangeably: each context and each end user category requires one or the other variety. However, because a mix of both can be applied to the audiovisual (AV) sector, in the EASIT project we normally use the label E2U as an umbrella term any time it is not necessary to refer specifically to PL or E2R (cf. EASIT 2019; Inclusion Europe 2014; Perego 2020: 30).

Language simplification is an invaluable means to accomplish accessible communication, which in turn is decisive in several contexts (Perego 2020). Besides preventing communication exclusion and granting the vulgarization of contents, accessible language is known, for instance, to be an effective means for language comprehension, acquisition and learning. Caring for the delivery of comprehensible messages is therefore beneficial to a wide array of audiences. These include people with cognitive disabilities (or “learning difficulties”), prelingual hearing impairment, aphasia, different types of dementia, autism, or multiple cooccurring disabilities, as well as abled people suffering from literacy deficits, migrants, language learners, tourists, or simply nonexperts. Currently, no widespread active text practice is implemented systematically – at least in Italy – to ease these groups of users, but a stronger focus on accessible communication would result in a better functioning and a more effective society. The consequences of unintelligible content can in fact be devastating and impact negatively on the system (cf. for instance miscommunication in the healthcare sector that can be life-threatening) and on a person’s life (wrong life-changing choices pertaining to health, sexuality, finance, can easily be the result of unclear communication). Overall, clear communication can save time, money, lives, or it can greatly improve the quality of life of many people. Bearing this in mind, the EASIT project was launched. The aim of the project is to produce training materials to form experts that can apply E2U principles to the audiovisual sector, which is a growing sector through which much relevant content is currently delivered. This aim is in line with the societal gap Europe is currently facing and it represents an important awareness-raising moment for many of the partners involved. Describing the EASIT course curriculum and training materials is beyond the scope of this paper (but see EASIT 2020 and Perego 2020 for more details). The way the course curriculum is structured, however, is meant to cover the most important areas of knowledge regarding E2U, AVT and AV journalism², which trainees will learn to integrate to provide new

² In a nutshell, the course curriculum includes four modules for an overall flexible workload of 30 ECTS. Module 1 is entitled “Media accessibility”, Module 2 is entitled “E2U language” and Module 4 is entitled “The professions”. Module 3 is threefold and includes three submodules: “E2U language and subtitling”, “E2U language and audio description”, and “E2U language and journalism”.

hybrid forms of E2U subtitling, audio description and news. Besides tackling the general need for simplification in several everyday life sectors, the project applies this need to already existing accessible forms of AVT, thus ensuring an even broader area of implementation of simplified information.

3. The EASIT project

EASIT (Easy Access for Social Inclusion Training, 2018-2021)³ is an EU project funded under the Erasmus+ Programme and led by Anna Matamala of the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Spain. The final aim of EASIT is to design a course curriculum and to create course materials to train experts in the creation of E2U audiovisual information, thus filling a crucial cultural and educational gap still characterizing most EU countries (Matamala *et al.* 2019).

Specifically, EASIT aims to define the skills of the professional(s) involved in creating E2U content in different settings taking into account already existing professional profiles (such as the audio describer, the subtitler, the journalist and the E2U expert) that can expand their skills to cater for innovative hybrid contexts in audiovisual media (EASIT 2018, p. 83). To do so, EASIT relies on a strategic partnership made of a blend of complementary partners from different fields (universities, user associations, and broadcaster) with a focus on one of the European priorities in the national context: social inclusion. Besides the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (UAB), the other academic partners involved include the Universities of Trieste in Italy (UNITS) and of Vigo in Spain (UVIGO), with extensive expertise in AVT and accessibility, and the German higher education institutions Stiftung Universität Hildesheim (SUH) and Sprachen & Dolmetscher Institut München (SDI), specialized in the research and the training of E2U content. The user associations comprise Dyslexiförbundet and Zavod RISA. Dyslexiförbundet (the Swedish National Association of Dyslexia) is the largest organization in Sweden uniting children, young and adults with reading, writing and mathematical difficulties and it aims at making life easier for users allowing them to take part in society by means of different activities. The RISA Institute was the first organization in Slovenia to address the issue of accessible information for people with intellectual and cognitive difficulties, and it is now specialized in producing information in E2R Slovene. Finally, Radiotelevizija Slovenija Javni Zavod Ljubljana is the national radio and television broadcaster in Slovenia, currently producing accessible content.

The working activities of EASIT, as is the case of all the Erasmus+ projects, are divided into six "intellectual outputs" (IOs), i.e., well-planned working activities, which are interwoven and crucial for the project development. In short, IO1 revolves around the stance of experts regarding practice and training in the field of E2U information. IO2 focuses on the production of a list of recommendations for E2U AV information. IO3 concentrates on what experts must know, and will produce a set of skills cards that will be the basis for the following IO4, which will propose a comprehensive curriculum design for the training of E2U experts. IO5 will focus on the development of modular and free teaching materials for the training of those who wish to become experts in the production of E2U subtitles, AD and news. IO6 will look into possible course certification procedures that could be implemented beyond the life of the project.

³ <http://pagines.uab.cat/easit/en>

Although all partners will contribute actively to each IO based on their specific field of expertise, each IO will be led by one academic partner (Table 2), though different participants and stakeholders outside the consortium will be involved to fulfill each IO's objective and to ensure a more effective development of the project activities.

Intellectual Outputs: Full title	Partner in charge
IO1: Common methodological framework for easy reading practice and training	UNITS
IO2: Innovation in hybrid services: recommendations in audiovisual media	SDI
IO3: Skills cards for new professional profiles	UVIGO
IO4: Curriculum and course design	SUH
IO5: Open educational resources development	UAB
IO6: Certification	UAB

Table 2
EASIT IOs and partners in charge.

EASIT was devised to respond to a clear societal and market need: today in Europe there is no clear definition of E2U language, its implementation is very diverse in different EU countries, and specific training in the production of E2U AV information is missing or not consistent (EASIT 2018). IO1, which is described more extensively in the following paragraph, represents a first step taken to gain fuller comprehension on the current European situation in order to propose a useful curriculum that will enable future employees in this field to be more aware, more flexible and more knowledgeable in their activities.

4. E2U practice and training in Europe

IO1, led by the University of Trieste, was the opening project activity, lasted for six months (01/9/2018-28/02/2019). The main aim of IO1 was to understand the situation of E2U training and practice in Europe. With this in mind, all IO1 activities were carried out in order to identify shared or new practices to offer recommendations for the definition of skills cards for new professional profiles to be implemented in a future curriculum and to finally create open educational resources or training materials.

Taking into account the aims of IO1, we identified the most adequate categories of respondents who could give us the information we were looking for, and we chose an online questionnaire as our preferred research instrument (Ackroyd, Hughes 1981; ADLAB PRO 2017a, 2017b; Rea, Parker 2005; Wyse 2012). The questionnaire was constructed to gather both quantitative and qualitative data through a majority of multiple-choice questions and some open boxes where respondents could enter free texts.

The questionnaire was developed in English and translated by partners into all the project languages, i.e., Catalan, Italian, Galician, German, Spanish, Slovene and Swedish. Given the heterogeneous group that we expected to target, including persons who struggle to read, a major rewriting work was carried out to create an accessible PL questionnaire for nonacademics. The thorough editing work on the technical language and the academic jargon was aimed at producing a comprehensible questionnaire, avoiding argot and making the language suitable for all respondents. We chose the Web Survey Creator platform for the online distribution of the questionnaire given its functionalities for the creation of multilingual pages.

The protocol for the questionnaire distribution and ethical matters were discussed with and approved by the Ethical Committee of the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona as

the project coordinator and by the Ethical Committee of the University of Trieste as the IO coordinator. The questionnaire was distributed as an anonymous survey, sending respondents a link via email or sharing the link via social media. After a piloting session enabling us to finalize and improve its effectiveness, the questionnaire distribution opened on the 14th of January 2019 and the questionnaire remained available online for 3 weeks.

Four categories of experts working on different aspects of E2U content were identified as the most appropriate target respondents: trainers, producers/creators/writers, translators/adapters, and validators/advisors. Trainers are experts in E2U content who teach, as a main or a secondary profession, the principles of E2U language in diverse types of courses (academic, vocational, in companies or associations, etc.). Producers/creators/writers are experts in E2U content who write texts directly in E2R or PL. Translators/adapters are experts in E2U content who translate or adapt a standard text into an E2R or a PL text version. Validators/advisors are experts in E2U content or end-users who check the quality of existing E2U texts and normally participate in different stages of E2U production besides attending to the final process of testing and validation.

Defining the four categories of respondents was difficult, because the roles and the terminology used to refer to them differ from country to country, and they are not consistent in literature (EASIT 2019; Maaß 2020; Perego 2020). This is why we decided to maintain multiple labels referring to the same professional expertise. Working on the definition of the categories of respondents to the IO1 questionnaire however enabled us to draw a clearer picture regarding the actual current roles that experts can cover in the E2U context in Europe. This was crucial for IO1, and set the terminological and theoretical basis for the following project IOs. The general results of the survey showed that experts (who could provide multiple answers) in fact normally cover more than one expertise, as shown in Figure 1.

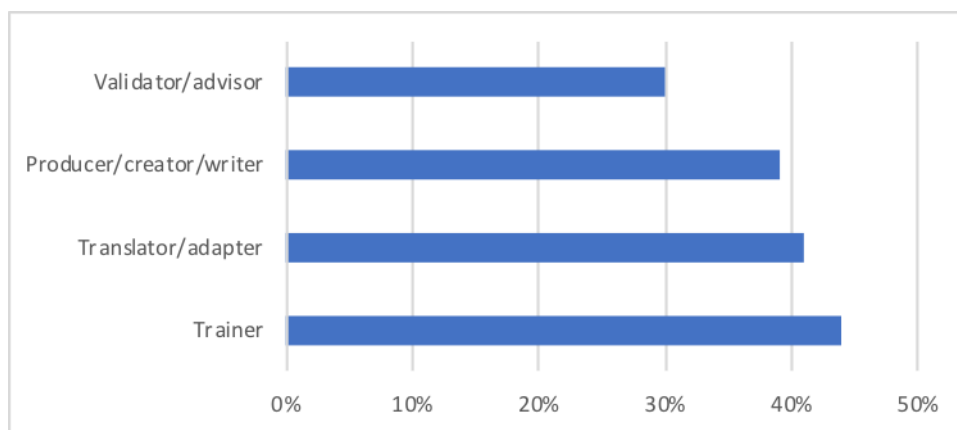


Figure 1
Distribution of expertise among the 128 European respondents.

Figure 2 shows the geographical distribution of the 128 respondents and it somehow reflects the current EU scenario with countries such as Germany, Spain and Sweden being at the forefront on the subject, and countries where E2U is not established and is still practiced unevenly.

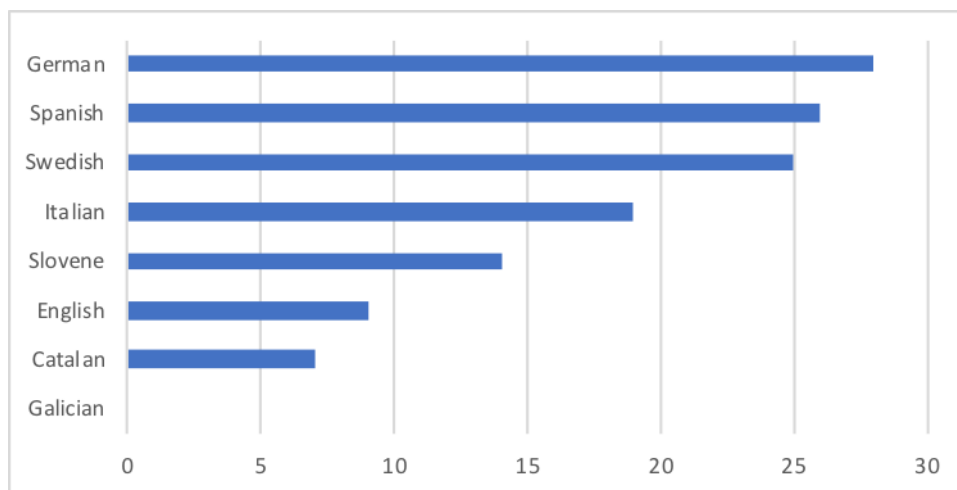


Figure 2
Mother tongue of the 128 IO1 questionnaire respondents.

The data gathered from the IO1 questionnaire contributed to offering a snapshot of the current situation regarding the training and practice of E2U content in Europe, or more specifically in the countries that are directly involved in the EASIT project, and it contributed to highlighting possible areas of need and improvement in E2U training based on the real experience of professionals in the field. A full overview of the results is included in the final IO1 report (EASIT 2019) and in Perego (2020), where methodological details are also focused on. In the following paragraphs, I will concentrate on the responses of the 19 Italian E2U experts in order to focus on the Italian context and to pinpoint commonalities and differences between the Italian and the European scenarios.

5. E2U practice and training in Italy

In the following paragraphs, I will analyse a subset of data gathered as a result of the IO1 research activities. Specifically, I will focus on the Italian situation regarding E2U training and practice as it emerges from the answers of 19 experts (Perego 2019). First, I will draw a short profile of the Italian experts in terms of age and years of experience, education and training received, current role as an expert and previous profession(s). Then, I will focus on the current practice in the Italian context, and I will give an account of the distribution of the working activity in terms of modality, format, field and services covered. I will also tackle the aspect of the professional relationships between peers and with end-users. Finally, I will concentrate on training to pinpoint the type of training received and needed, and the areas where E2U is taught more in Italy.

5.1. A short profile of the Italian E2U experts

Nineteen experts (74% female) responded to the questionnaire, and contributed outlining a professional figure that is not well known, or fully recognized, in Italy. Italian respondents are mainly adults between the ages of 51 and 60 years (Figure 3), older than the European average where the 41-50 age range is the value that appears most frequently.

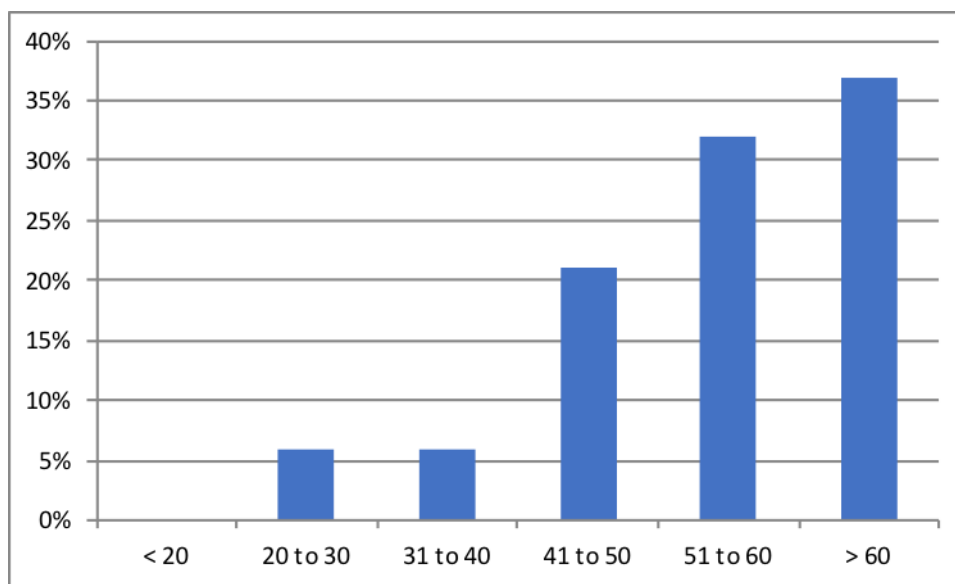


Figure 3
Age range distribution of the 19 Italian respondents.

Most received a form of **education**, with 53% holding a master's degree, and 32% a post-graduate or PhD degree, and come from varied fields of study, mainly dealing with language and communication. These fields include, in descending order, didactics, language and linguistics, communication and journalism, translation and psychology, or seemingly unrelated fields, such as sociology, philosophy, culture studies, graphic design and music, but also science and math. As far as the current **working position** is concerned, data show that Italian experts mainly work in universities or research institutions (32% of hit responses), in public institutions (21%) and in not-for-profit organizations (21%). In terms of **roles covered**, most work as trainers in the field of E2U content (47% of hit responses), and fewer are translators (16%), Peregos/producers/creators (16%) or validators/advisors (11%), which is in line with the general trend observed in Europe (EASIT 2019, pp. 25-27). 32% have a different profession that is not necessarily related to the E2U area. As observed also at a European level (EASIT 2019), Italian E2U experts (63%) normally **come from other professions** (they were mainly teachers, journalists or writers, researchers, but also educators, cultural organizers, museum directors, psychologists, publishing editors or graphic designers, etc.), meaning that their involvement with E2U developed at a later stage in their life: in spite of its relevance in several fields, E2U content is not applied consistently as a primary or full job – which might partially explain the older age of Italian experts compared to the average European age.

For some of the current professionals, working as an E2U expert is not always a **full-time job**. It is in fact a paid part-time job for 37% and a non-paid volunteer activity for another 37% of the respondents. Only 27% define their activity as a paid full-time job. Finally, in terms of **years of experience** in the field, it is interesting to observe that in a country where E2U is not yet established and widespread, 31% of the experts have been producing E2U content for more than 15 years (Figure 4), vs. 14% in Europe. More than half (N=13) however do not have a long-time experience, which in fact is growing but still in its infancy, with 5 people with less than 3 years of experience.

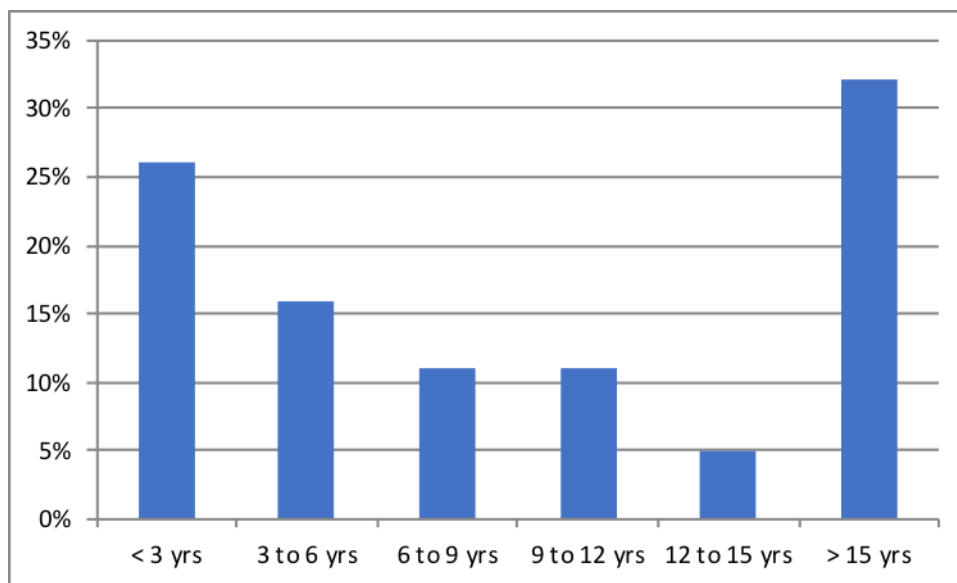


Figure 4
Years of experience in the E2U content production field.

5.2. Working practice in the Italian context

In our survey, we were interested in exploring the current distribution of experts depending on diverse factors. In particular, we wanted to know what E2U modality (E2R or PL) they usually produce; what format they usually work with; for what field they produce E2U content; and what services they provide more often (Table 3).

Modality	Format	Field	Service
E2R	Printed content	Education: for example teaching materials, etc.	Creation/writing of E2U content
PL	Digital content	Public administration and justice: for example institutional and administrative documents, public and legal documents, government statements, contracts, etc.	Adaptation/editing/translation of E2U content (i.e., starting from an original text and turning it into an easy-to understand text)
	Audio content	Media and journalism: for example news, press releases, TV programmes, film scripts, web content, etc.	Validation/revision of E2U content
	Audiovisual content (including interpreting)	Culture and literature: museum brochures or audio-guides, opera librettos, theatre plays, other cultural events, novels, etc.	Quality control of the final texts

Table 3
Modality, field, format and service.

We formulated specific multiple-choice questions with multiple-choice response options. Overall, Italian results are in line with the general results emerged from the European survey (EASIT 2019, p. 30). In Italy, too, E2R is the modality that is produced more often by most professionals (79%), followed by PL (11%) – unless experts produce both (6%), but this is not a very common scenario. In Italy, too, printed content is the format experts usually work with: 95% of the respondents produce E2U printed content, but 58% also work with digital content and 21% with audiovisual content. In Italy, too, creation/writing of E2R language is the most performed activity (74% of hit answers), followed by E2R adaptation/editing/translation (32%) and E2R validation/revision (21%). In this respect, respondents appear to feel the need for a stronger emphasis in training on the adaptation/editing/translation (37%) and the creation/writing (26%) of E2U content, which are also the more performed services. Table 4 illustrates the percentage of hit answers regarding the services practiced most often when working, the services that were taught more in training contexts, and the areas where respondents believe that they would need more emphasis in training.

		Practiced more often	Training received	Training needed
Creation/writing	E2R	74%	100%	26%
	PL	16%	20%	
Adaptation/editing/translation	E2R	32%	50%	37%
	PL	5%	10%	
Validation/revision	E2R	21%	40%	21%
	PL	0%	10%	
Quality control	E2R	16%	40%	11%
	PL	5%	10%	

Table 4

Services taught and performed more often, and training needs of the Italian respondents.

A difference between the general and the national trend was observed regarding the field where E2U practices are implemented (EASIT 2019, p. 30; Figure 5). Italian experts normally produce E2U contents in the field of education (58%), but they operate less frequently in areas such as public administration and justice (21%), culture and literature (11%), media and journalism (5%). Only some (16%) produce E2U content in several fields, and a few do not have a specific field of production (5%). This shows that the attention of Italian experts is mainly directed (or just limited) to school rather than to the rest of the social and public life (where the implementation of E2U language would be crucial), as opposed to a European situation, where experts distribute more evenly over diverse fields, thus showing a more established status of E2U in general, and a more balanced implementation of both E2U modalities. This finding suggests that Italy still needs major sensibilization on the subject and it still needs to implement E2U practices properly and fully. Currently, E2U texts do not enjoy official status, and this might be one reason why their implementation is not yet encouraged. The E2R version of a local law on

the inclusion of people with disability (Law No. 7 of 14 July 2015), for instance, was provided in the Italian autonomous province of Bolzano but only the Italian, German and Ladin versions of the law were recognized as official.

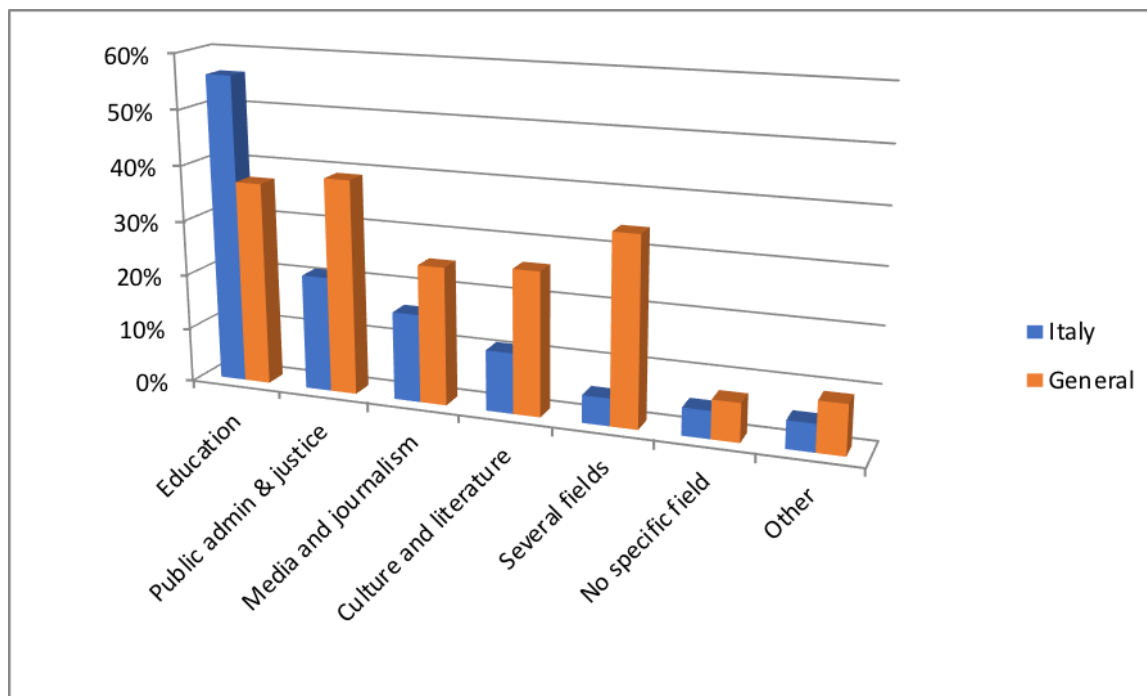


Figure 5
Fields for which Italian and European experts usually produce E2U content.

A further interesting aspect pertaining to the working practice that was investigated is the relationship of experts with peers and end users. In the Italian working context, as in the EU context, indirect forms of contact and exchange between experts prevail, whereas direct contact with end users is quite common. According to the Italian results, when experts write E2U content they **mainly work alone** (48%) rather than in a team with other experts (Figure 6), thus showing that the working practice is quite a solitary activity. This is confirmed by the fact that experts rarely (26%) or never (21%) ask the opinion of colleagues to solve specific problems. Whenever possible they prefer to access the solutions of colleagues indirectly, e.g., by reading existing E2U content, because they find them very (47%) or rather (37%) helpful.

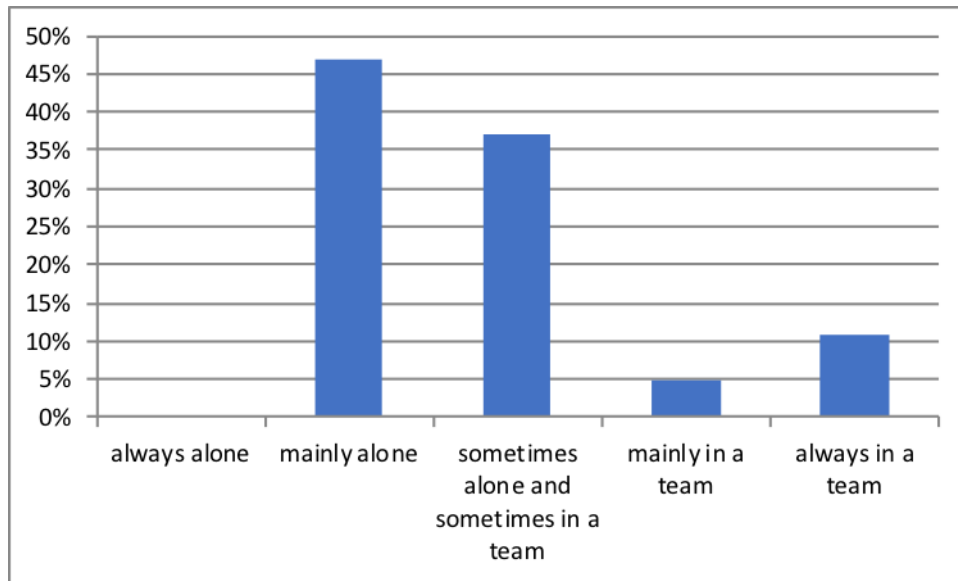


Figure 6
Working habits: teamwork.

The direct collaboration with end users is instead an established practice showing that it is more important for experts to **work with people who need and use E2U content** when they prepare their texts (Figure 7). Italian users do not seem to always offer feedback, but when they do, most respondents take advantage of it and incorporate it into their final versions.

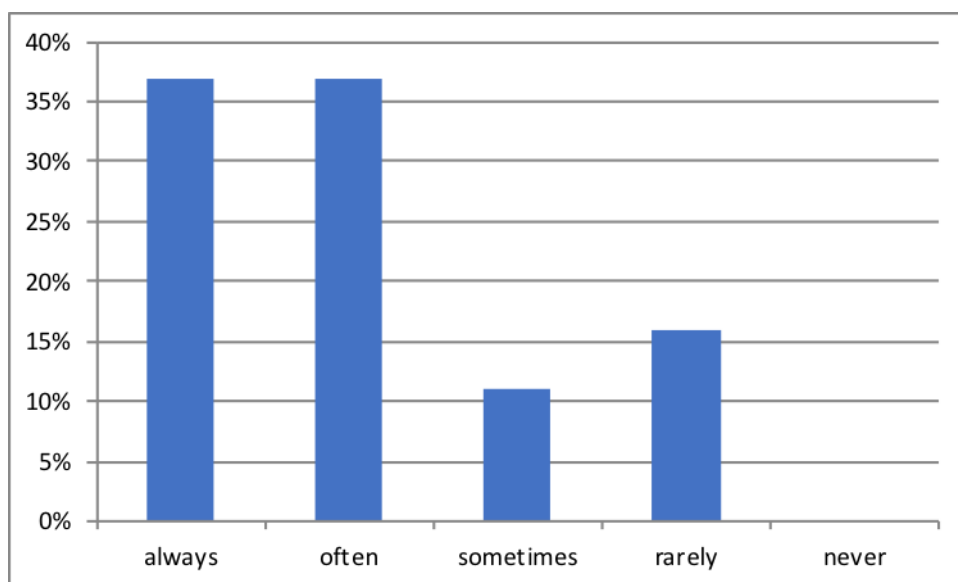


Figure 7
Working habits: cooperation with end-users.

Finally, an important reference tool when producing E2U content are guidelines, both for Italian experts and for European experts. Italian interviewees always (15%) or often (50%) use existing guidelines when they write E2U content and most think that shared guidelines

for all Europe could be useful. The Italian scenario regarding guidelines seems to be in line with the more general European scenario: experts normally use international guidelines in their local language when a translation is available (Perego 2020: 132). This indicates that international guidelines are established and recognized by professionals, including Italian professionals, and they are considered reliable. In fact, they are used extensively both in training and in working environments. Local publications and language-specific documents however are often used as an important integration to more general recommendations. Specifically, in the open text box, the Italian survey-takers indicated the 2014 Inclusion Europe guidelines (emerged as a tangible result of the project Pathways) as the preferred international source of reference⁴. Interestingly, some respondents mentioned that they normally use Italian grammars as important references to find effective and “various modes of structuring sentences”. Other times, they use guidelines that were devised for other purposes, such as the Italian guidelines for communication with aphasic people. This indicates the need for (but also the current lack of) E2U language-specific material the Italian experts can resort to as opposed to what happens in other European countries where E2U is more established and implemented (e.g., Germany; Bredel, Maaß 2016; Maaß 2020). Italian respondents in fact highlight the work done by each in adapting what they find to their specific needs. Finally, the 1968 book of the Italian artist and designer Bruno Munari *Design and visual communication* is referred to by a respondent, which reminds us of the importance of the graphic and layout-related aspects of E2R language.

5.3. Training in the Italian context

We know that systematic training in E2U is still needed both at a national and at an EU level, although today some countries offer more training opportunities than others do. In Italy, where E2U is not yet fully established as a discipline or as a practice, only half of the respondents (53%) declared that they have **received specific training** in the production of E2U content – and 90% has received a **certification** after the training, with only 20% having been asked to show it when applying for a job. It is not surprising that the overall numbers are higher in the European context, where E2U is more established and implemented (EASIT 2019, p. 31): for instance in Germany, Spain and Sweden the percentage of respondents who have received training is respectively 71%, 77% and 80%. In terms of time devoted to training, 40% of the Italian respondents received training for 10 to 30 hours and 40% for 30 to 60 hours. Only 20% reached more than 60 hours. Again, the situation in other European countries is different: in Germany and in Sweden the majority of respondents (respectively 65% and 60%) was trained for over 60 hours. Spain instead shows a situation resembling the Italian situation, with 35% of the respondents who received training for 10 to 30 hours and 30% for 30 to 60 hours.

Those who received training in Italy were all trained **outside the academic world**, as most European respondents – university training was in fact received only in Sweden (N=8), Germany (N=7) and the UK (N=2). This shows that in Italy E2U still has to make its way in the academia (Perego 2020, p. 131). It will probably take some time before E2U enters academia as a recognized, taught discipline, as it happened with AVT. AVT, for

⁴ The Italian translation of these guidelines was sponsored by Anffas Onlus (Associazione Nazionale Famiglie di Persone con Disabilità Intellettiva e/o Relazionale), a National Association of Families of Persons with Intellectual and/or Relational Disabilities, and is freely available online.

instance, has started to gain ground in the Italian University only recently, and systematic courses are still few and often part of more general modules (such as language modules). As far as E2R and Plain Language, they are sometimes tackled in linguistics and translation theory courses, or in language and cultural mediation degrees, but to my knowledge full university courses are not yet systematically available. Furthermore, in academia, much research and attention has been devoted to legalese and its simplification, but in terms of implementation E2U is normally applied to other (underresearched) material, including didactic material. This points to a still confused situation with repercussions on the actual possibility of a short-term implementation of E2U in many sectors.

As far as **the forms of training** received by Italian experts, these are in line with the European scenario: one-off workshops (50% of hits on this option) and in-house training (40% of hits) are the most common, followed by vocational courses (30% of hits) or cases of self-taught experts (20% of hits). In Italy, as in Europe (EASIT 2019, p. 32), training is received (and offered) mainly for E2R language (60%) rather than for PL. Rarely are the two modalities taught together (20%). In terms of **services**, the ones that are taught more often in Italy are the creation/writing of E2R content which is followed by the adaptation/editing/translation, validation/revision and quality control of E2R texts. As Figure 8 illustrates, PL is not given the same emphasis in training.

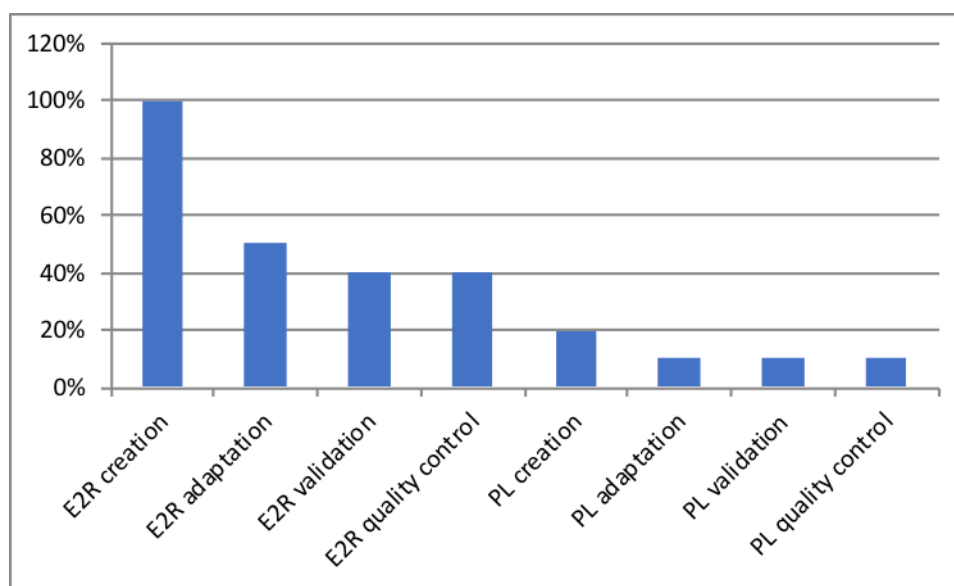


Figure 8
Services that are taught more often in Italy

In terms of **formats**, all Italian experts were trained to work with printed and a large number also received training to work with digital content, but in Italy not much attention is given to audiovisual content: only 20% of the respondents selected this item as one of the possible multiple-responses available. When it comes to teaching how to apply the principles of E2U in specific **fields**, the Italian trend differs from the EU trend, as illustrated in Figure 9. Here the percentages refer to the frequency with which respondents hit each possible response option. If in a broader European context all fields (media and journalism, public administration and justice, education, and culture and literature) are given approximately the same amount of importance (EASIT 2019, p. 34; Perego 2020,

pp. 127-128), in Italy the focus of training (and consequently of E2U implementation) is still limited to the field of education, where half of the Italian respondents were in fact trained, and seems to completely overlook important areas such as media and journalism but also culture and literature. This is in line with the production of E2U material (Figure 5) and shows that the Italian training is in line with the market needs.

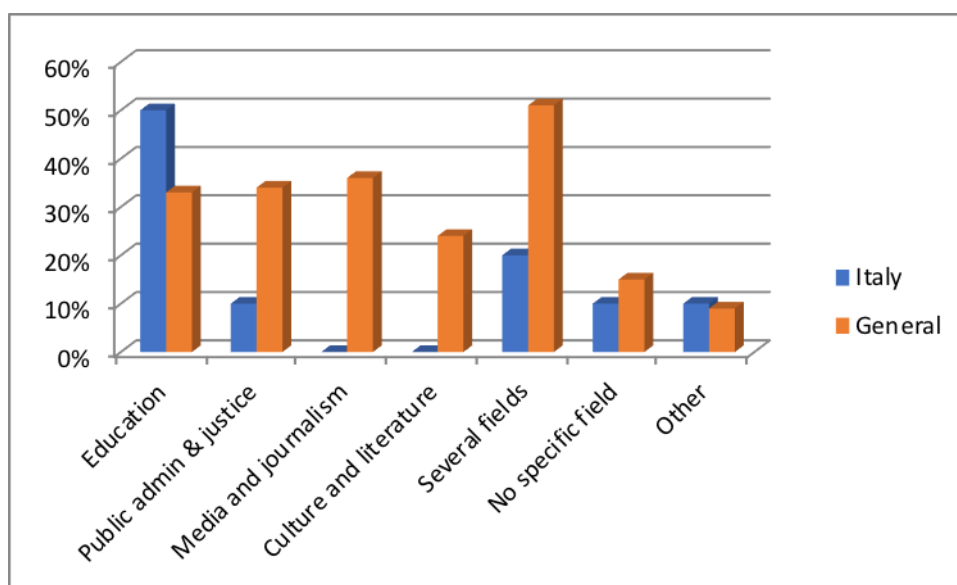


Figure 9
Fields where E2U training is offered in Italy and in Europe.

These data show the importance that Italian experts ascribe to training, which is considered a crucial means contributing to the formation of professionals. The idea that it is not possible to master E2U only by experience is rooted in the Italian respondents, who seem to have exploited the few yet varied training opportunities offered nationally. A glance at the contexts where E2U is taught and at the type of training received however show that academia in Italy is currently not yet ready to offer fully-fledged formation, or a formation at all, in such an important and emerging filed. This might depend on the unofficial status of E2U in both its forms and on the fact that it is not yet recognized and implemented. Both experts and users would definitely benefit from the involvement of academia in this sector, which might also help to determine a more balanced approach to E2R and PL, and on their fields of application. In fact, both the Italian and the European data have shown that up to now E2R (which is more codified and easier to teach) has been prioritized in training and PL has been overlooked, perhaps due to the fact that it is not yet fully standardized in all languages, and does not have strict and prescriptive guidelines, which makes it more flexible to use but even more difficult to teach in a structured setting (Bredel, Maaß 2016).

6. Training preferences

When talking of training, a further aspect can be examined: the training preferences and needs of the experts. Knowing what experts like in terms of training activities and what they believe they should study more were in fact considered important pieces of information contributing to the future development of the EASIT course curriculum and

training materials. To know what training activities are considered more useful by experts, we prepared a set of multiple-choice questions with multiple-choice response options. The general and the Italian results differ (Figure 10). If in the overall EU context practice wins over theory (EASIT 2019, pp. 34-35), in the Italian context we observed a slight preference for “passive” activities in training setting. Although writing exercises (60% of hit answers) are on the top of the list of the training activities that Italian experts find useful, an academic, theoretical approach does characterize the Italian context, where such activities as analyzing existing E2U content (60%), attending to lectures (40%), class discussion based on errors (40%), discussing and comparing E2U guidelines (20%) win over, e.g., internship and working with experts (10% vs. 46% of hit answers in Europe) as well as practical revision exercises (10% vs. 40%). This might suggest a less practical approach to the subject in a country where E2U is still more studied than practiced and implemented, or even the fact that in such a context there are not many opportunities to practice as there are to study theory, also on one’s own.

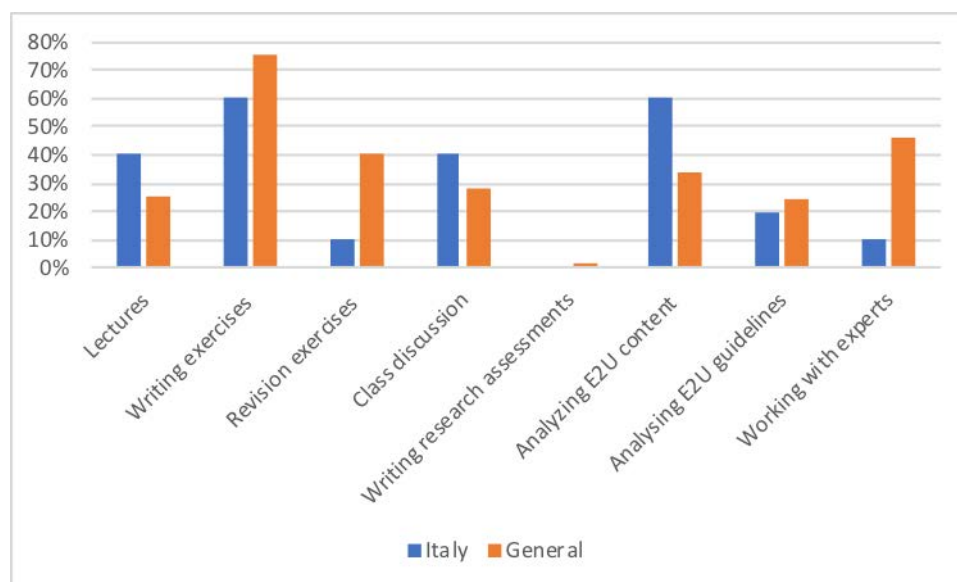


Figure 10
More useful training activities according to the Italian and the European experts.

The inclination of Italian experts for theory is also reflected in their perceived training needs: when asked in what areas should an expert have knowledge to deliver good quality E2U content, respondents, who could choose up to three answers out of a list of eight, claimed that knowledge of the target group needs, of the E2U principles, and of language and linguistics are regarded as essential. Below, the nine items listed in the questionnaire ordered according to the percentage of hit answers:

- Target groups: types of disabilities, needs, perception and cognitive processing (95%)
- Easy-to-understand principles, guidelines, recommendations and standards (58%)
- Language and linguistics (for example, knowing the principles of text analysis, text cohesion and coherence, language complexity, simplification methods) (53%)
- Studies in reading (print and multimodal texts), and in reading disabilities (32%)
- Cognitive linguistics (for example, knowing the principles of language processing) (21%)
- (Media) accessibility (standards, legislation, guidelines, principles and applicable scenarios, technologies, etc.) (11%)

- Multimodality (including the role of paratextual information) (11%)
- Easy-to-understand history, status, and applicable scenarios (5%)

In spite the preference for theory during training, Italian experts seem to recognize the importance of a practical approach in learning the job. Among the activities they undertake to improve and maintain their skills after training, experience in the field is considered important by 48% of the respondents – which this time is in line with the EU trend. However, when it comes to the activities actually performed to improve their skills, Italians choose a varied approach (Figure 11) and they seem to mix (and like to the same extent) practical and theoretical activities ranging from the participation in conferences and workshops to studying existing E2U-related materials and analyzing existing E2U contents; doing research; talking with users and with other experts; participating in in-house training.

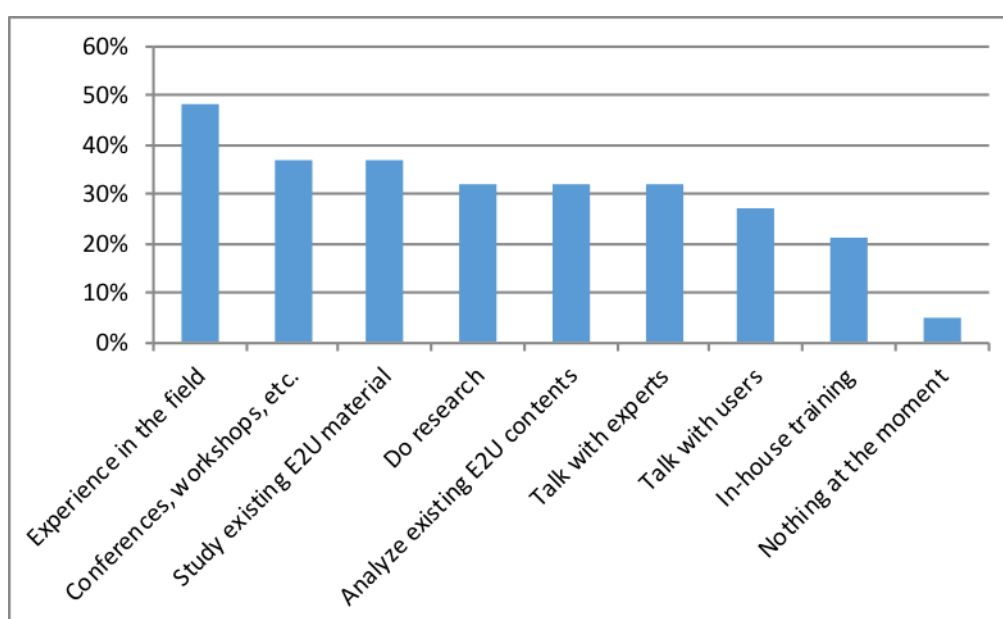


Figure 11
Preferred activities to maintain and improve skills after training.

Overall these results show that Italy will certainly benefit from a curriculum where more emphasis is given on the implementation of E2U. The overall results of IO1 point exactly to this: writing and editing should be prioritized in a future curriculum, and if at all possible, a full course should include a traineeship period to enable trainees to work with experts and learn on the job. Theory should not be overlooked but complement (vs. takeover) a practice-oriented course curriculum (Perego 2020; EASIT 2020).

7. Concluding remarks

This paper reported the results of a survey conducted for the European EASIT project. The survey was designed to address European experts working in the field of E2U content, and to identify the current training and practice situation in order to understand what is currently done, offered and missing in this field. The overall results of the survey, which

constituted the first working phase of EASIT, are detailed in a project report (EASIT 2019) and in a monograph (Perego 2020) and they were invaluable for the development of the subsequent project activities. These are in fact leading to the final aim of the project which is to design a course curriculum and to develop free and online training materials for the formation of future experts in the field of audiovisual E2U content production based on the feedback and the needs of those who currently work as experts (EASIT 2018, 2020; Matamala et al. 2020; Perego 2020; note 2). Such materials are due in August 2021 and, at the moment of writing this article, are being devised, tested and produced.

In this paper, the focus was on a subset of survey data that enabled me to describe the Italian scenario regarding E2U practice and training (see also Perego 2020). Results are based on the responses of 19 Italian E2U experts who took part in the research. Although the Italian sample is not large, we find it reasonably representative in a country where E2U is still scarcely known and implemented, as well as often practiced by nonexperts (Fortis 2003; Sciumbata 2017). Even though this sample does not enable us to fully generalize results and make inferences, it offered a useful pivotal pool of data to paint a scenario that had never been painted before in this sector, and that can be integrated in the future if further research is conducted, or if the survey is replicated.

Overall, the Italian data seem to suggest that our national situation is in line with the situation observed analyzing the 128 responses provided by all the European survey takers. Experts have a solid educational background – though not specifically in E2U – and come from areas of study or professions that are not linked to content simplification, but that somehow relate to the broader fields of language and communication. This suggests that in spite of the different status and level of implementation of E2U in different European countries, specific, recognized and systematic forms of training are still missing and needed in many countries. When they are offered, academia is not consistently involved, with the exception of Germany and Sweden, where E2U is part of the recognized academic pathway.

Furthermore, in Italy as in Europe, more attention is devoted to the training in and the production of E2R content rather than to the training in and the production of PL content. It is true that the two E2U modalities are different and that E2R is more structured, regulated and therefore “teachable” (Bredel, Maaß 2016; Fortis 2003; Matausch, Nietzio 2012; Maaß 2020; Piemontese 1996). However, their more balanced implementation would guarantee more adequate inclusive communication in several sectors of the everyday life. In fact, E2R and PL should not be used interchangeably. Given their different communicative scope, they should be directed to diverse users in diverse situations. Adequate training in, and implementation of, both modalities would therefore be essential to make the most of each and to really benefit (rather than confuse and stigmatise) specific end users.

In spite of the commonalities that emerged, Italy diverges from the overall project results in some interesting aspects. To start with, Italian experts are older than the average European experts. This might relate to the newness of the E2U practice and the lack of specific training in Italy that led diverse language experts to convert to the E2U sector after working in different realms. This is supported by the data showing that only a minority of Italians (14%) has an experience in the field exceeding 15 years. Reading the open answers provided by the Italian survey takers and matching them with some survey data, we can observe that a common scenario seems to be that of experienced teachers who felt the need to adjust didactic materials for students with learning difficulties (e.g.: “I adjust already existing materials for my didactic requirements”), and in some cases converted this need into a job.

In Italy, E2U is more taught than it is practiced, which suggests that today content simplification in all its forms and applications in different contexts remains a theoretical idea with little space for real implementation. This is confirmed, for instance, by the fact that for most Italians working in the field is usually not a full time or paid job, but a voluntary activity that is performed along with other activities, such as a primary job.

Another aspect that shows the need for action in Italy, is that E2U is associated and implemented mainly in the field of education, whereas other relevant fields of the cultural and the social life are currently overlooked, at least in practice. Italian legalese is one of the areas of language that is researched the most, but apparently the worthy research results obtained by Italian scholars working in the field are not effectively disseminated, applied for the benefit of society, or exploited for related national policies.

The results of the Italian survey point to the need for a higher level of awareness and sensitization, and for more consistent, systematic and customizable training – according to an anonymous comment, “all the experts involved in education should compulsorily be trained in order to meet the needs of the constantly increasing population of students with cognitive difficulties”. The ultimate aim of EASIT is to design a flexible curriculum and to produce flexible training materials to be applied in a specific area of communication: AV communication. Based on the results of this analysis, more attention will be directed to the specificities of each project country in order to offer a curriculum that can cover varied needs, in the hope that simpler communication, both in the AV and in other fields, can slowly but steadily become recognized and implemented also in those countries where it nowadays is still (sadly) overlooked.

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