Understand this if you can: plain administrative language and reading comprehension in Slovene and English among international students at the University of Ljubljana

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Research in other countries has shown that L1 speakers understand legal and administrative texts much better when they are written in accordance with the principles of plain language, but there have so far been no such studies in Slovenia and there is a general scarcity of studies involving L2 speakers. This paper investigates the comprehensibility of administrative texts related to university enrolment among international students at the University of Ljubljana, focusing on Slovene and English versions in both original and plain language formats. Drawing on a mixed-methods cross-sectional design, the research combines a reading comprehension test and a survey administered to 112 students, primarily South Slavic L1 speakers, enrolled in Year Plus Slovene courses. The results show that plain language texts significantly improve comprehension, with the Slovene plain version yielding 68.8% correct answers and the English plain version 67.2%, compared to 55.8% and 34% for the original versions, respectively. Slovene texts were generally better understood

than English ones, suggesting that language choice and linguistic proximity play a role. However, the style of language – plain vs. original – proved more influential than the language itself. The study highlights challenges faced by international applicants in the process of university enrolment and suggests that plain language versions of key documents could enhance their experience. These findings contribute to discussions on functional literacy and linguistic accessibility in higher education, with implications for institutional communication practices and internationalization strategies.

Keywords: plain language, clear writing, administrative texts, L2 Slovene, L2 English, functional literacy

1   Introduction

Today, written media dominate communication more than ever. They are widely accessible, fast, and easy to use, offering multimedia integration and hyperlinks for deeper exploration. However, written communication has limitations. It is primarily one-way, preventing direct interaction, (further) clarification of the meaning of what is being communicated or of the circumstances or the tone, and impeding negotiation of interpretation. This unidirectionality demands careful attention to the needs of readers. This is particularly true in the case of legal and administrative texts, which often represent high-stakes reading challenges for the readers, potentially changing the course of their lives. In the case of international students as educational migrants (Pirih Svetina, 2024), their success in understanding written texts of this type – or lack of it – may determine whether or not they are able to move to a particular country, enrol in the study programme of their choice, get adequate healthcare insurance, and so on.

This paper examines how public institutions, including the University of Ljubljana, communicate administrative and legal information to international students, a vulnerable group primarily addressed through written texts on websites, leaflets, and brochures. These students, whether degree students completing their full studies in Slovenia or exchange students staying in the country for only one or two semesters, are typically L2 users of Slovene and English, often coming from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Differences

in knowledge, context, and generational perspectives between text producers and addressees further complicate communication.

2 Slovene context

Slovene educational institutions, lacking prior experience with L2 users of Slovene, often provide information for international students exclusively in English,[1] although most degree-seeking students are then expected to follow their studies completely in Slovene and their L2 Slovene may be stronger than their L2 English. A particular challenge in the Slovene writing tradition is the assumption of an ideal addressee – someone expected to know and understand everything (Ferbežar and Stabej, 2008; Ferbežar, 2012; Kavalir and Pirih Svetina, 2023). The writer unconsciously anticipates the most capable reader, while at the same time maintaining a hierarchical position. As a result, the responsibility for understanding the text lies solely with the addressee, never with the author, which is close to John Hinds's (1987) notion of a "reader-responsible" writing style and Edward's Hall (1976) concept of "high-context" communication cultures.

As previous analysis of English-medium communication in Slovenia shows, the primary institutional focus is on "ensuring that the text is professionally and linguistically correct and adequately reflects the dignity and reputation of the institution" (Kavalir and Pirih Svetina, 2023, p. 222), rather than adapting the content to the expected B2 English proficiency level of international students. Consequently, texts tend to be overly technical and difficult to understand, diverging significantly from similar texts in Anglo-Saxon contexts. The focus on maintaining institutional prestige may also lead to a discrepancy between what an institution wants to communicate to its users and what it actually communicates to them. For instance, the IKTERUS project (Kavalir and Milavec Kapun, 2023) found that Slovene institutions often provided information about themselves with a view to promotion,

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1   The web page Study in Slovenia (https://studyinslovenia.si), operated by CMEPIUS – the Centre of the Republic of Slovenia for Mobility and European Educational and Training Programmes, is a case in point. The University of Ljubljana Faculty of Arts website for incoming exchange students (https://www.ff.uni-lj.si/studij/international-office-incoming-students-and-professors) is also provided exclusively in English.

rather than focusing on information that international students actually needed.

3   Legal language

Termed "legalese", the language of legal texts is often criticized for being formal and convoluted. It is characterized by legal jargon and syntactic complexity. These elements reflect the complexity and precision required in legal matters and are crucial for legal practitioners but often pose challenges for non-experts. Early scholarship in the field recognized that many legal terms are Latin or derived from Latin, and are often morphologically complex and exhibit a great deal of redundancy (e.g. *cease and desist*) (Mellinkoff, 1963). More recently, studies have shown that specialized legal lexicology is polysemous and culturally dependent, and that specialized meanings of legal terms often differ from their everyday senses (Mattila, 2012).

The syntactic complexity of legal texts has been argued to be the consequence of the crucial principle of legal writing, which is that "[t]he sentence constitutes the basic syntactic unit, and is traditionally constructed as a self-contained, context-free entity" (Hiltunen, 2012, p. 41). To incorporate the required amount of information, sentences in legal texts tend to be longer compared to other genres, with more clauses, and more passive voice and nominalizations. They are also characterized by a lack of connectors and other elements (e.g. pronouns) creating cohesion between sentences (Hiltunen, 2012).

4   Plain language and clear writing

The concept of Plain English emerged as the first widely recognized form of clear and accessible language, rooted in the Anglo-Saxon world with a long-standing, decentralized development. While figures like George Orwell had previously criticized overly ornate bureaucratic language (Orwell, 1946), the term entered the public sphere in 1948 when the UK Treasury commissioned its first official writing guide, later revised in 1954 and still in use. The initiative was driven by the civic duty to communicate laws and complex rights clearly to citizens (Gowers, 1954, pp. 21–22). In the UK such efforts have mainly focused on

legal communication, led by the private organization the Plain English Campaign[2]. Empirical studies show that these efforts have resulted in a number of changes to legal texts, for instance the average sentence length in British statutes went down from 92.50 words per paragraph in 1970 to 37.06 words per paragraph in 1990 (Kurzon, 1997, p. 131).

In the US the movement is known as the Plain English Movement, beginning with New York State's 1977 requirement for plain language in consumer contracts (Moukad, 1980). Consumer rights and healthcare then became key areas for development, particularly due to the health risks posed by misunderstandings (Stableford and Mettger, 2007). The federal Paperwork Reduction Act of 1980 marked the legal beginning of this process, followed by the Plain Writing Act of 2010, mandating plain language in all public documents and requiring annual compliance reporting (https://www.plainlanguage.gov/law). Ireland is drafting a similar law, and globally, organizations like Plain Language Association International (Canada) and the International Plain Language Federation (https://www.iplfederation.org) are working toward the widespread establishment of the initiative, with a multilingual ISO standard approved in 2019. Clarity[3] is the most important association for the promotion of plain legal language in the English-speaking world.

In the EU, the push for plain language is increasingly present, for instance in Directive 93/13/EEC Article 5: "In the case of contracts where all or certain terms offered to the consumer are in writing, these terms must always be drafted in plain, intelligible language" (Council of the European Communities, 1993), or in Regulation No. 536/2014 Article 37: "[The results of the clinical trial] shall be accompanied by a summary written in a manner that is understandable to laypersons" (European Parliament and Council of the European Union, 2014). In addition, the EU has produced resources such as *How to Write Clearly* (European Union, 2013) and *Claire's Clear Writing Tips* (European Commission, 2016; no longer available).

Plain language / clear writing should be distinguished from easy language. While both approaches aim to simplify complex language

2   https://plainenglish.co.uk
3   https://www.clarity-international.org/about-clarity

on various linguistic levels, including vocabulary and syntax, and are defined as "language varieties of different national languages with reduced linguistic complexity, which aim to improve readability and comprehensibility of texts" (Hansen-Schirra and Maaß, 2020, p. 17; cf. Maaß, 2020), the key difference is that plain language targets the general population, while easy language specifically promotes inclusivity for people with communication disabilities, as outlined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006), which Slovenia has also ratified (cf. Haramija and Knapp, 2019). It should therefore be noted that plain language does not entail "plain thought", as Rastelli (2025, pp. 11–15) puts it, and the purpose of plain language is to explain complex concepts but to "[facilitate] the job of the language parser by eliminating unnecessary difficulties" (p. 11). From a psycholinguistic point of view, "[a] certain degree of difficulty is not only tolerable, but also desirable for efficient reading and language processing" (Rastelli, 2025, p. 61).

In the Slovene context, initiatives and practical activities in plain language (*razumljiv jezik*) and clear writing (*jasnopisje / jasno pisanje*) have been almost non-existent, with the exception of the publications of the European Commission, which have also been published in Slovene, and of the book chapter by Kavalir and Pirih Svetina (2023) as part of the IKTERUS project on communicating medical information to international students. Slovenia has, however, seen some initiatives to implement easy language (*lahek jezik*)[4], which is a separate type of language simplification meant for individuals with special needs (https://lahkojebrati.si). In addition, the Centre for Slovene as a Second and Foreign Language has been developing graded readers for L2 speakers of Slovene, with the first ones published in 2021 (Alič et al., 2021).

5 Plain language / clear writing and reading comprehension

Language simplification can be seen as a type of intralingual translation or adaptation (Pedrini, 2024, pp. 25–27) with the purpose of making texts easier to understand. The drafting techniques involved

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4   The Slovene terminology is still in development.

in the process include careful planning, clear organization with short paragraphs, an average sentence length of 15–25 words and a preference for the subject-verb-object word order, plain design that uses blank space and graphic techniques (e.g. tables and pictures) to structure the text, with bullet points rather than continuous text and using font size and bolding/italics for emphasis, concrete rather than abstract language with examples, use of the active voice and verbal forms rather than nominalizations, thorough editing, and finally, if at all possible, testing to make sure the text is comprehensible to the target audience (Adler, 2012, pp. 76–78). While researchers note that comprehensibility is also a conceptual and not only a linguistic issue where "[s]ometimes it is the linguistically simplest texts that raise the most serious comprehensibility problems" (Ződi, 2019, p. 246), many of these suggestions follow from research into reading comprehension, such as the comprehension and recall of abstract and concrete sentences (e.g. Holmes and Langford, 1976).

A number of studies have shown that legal and administrative texts written in accordance with these principles, rather than in the usual "legalese", contribute to better reading comprehension results among non-experts, whose recall of the information is also improved. Randall (2014), for instance, proved that Plain English versions of jury instructions (common in US courtrooms) significantly improved comprehension. In her study, linguistic complexity, especially the use of the passive voice and presupposed expressions, i.e. words and phrases "whose meanings are presupposed and not given anywhere in the [text], or are supplied only much later" (Randall, 2014, p. 234), was shown to decrease understanding in native speakers of English.

Martínez et al. (2022) designed a study where participants, who were native English speakers, read one of 12 short contracts in either the original or a simplified form, with the plain text differing from the original in four respects: low-frequency expressions were replaced with high-frequency ones; passive structures were replaced with active ones; centre-embedded clauses were reworded as independent sentences; all caps were converted into standard capitalization. The results showed that participants who read the plain version answered comprehension questions more accurately (73.5%) than those who

read the original version (67.7%). When asked to recall the texts themselves, the propositions from the simple texts were recalled better (42.4%) than those from the original texts (35.3%).

6 Research questions and methodology

Given that research confirms the difficulties experienced by L1 speakers in understanding legal and administrative texts, these issues can be expected to be further exacerbated in L2 speakers. The present study aims to answer the following research questions:

(1) How well do degree international students understand administrative texts related to higher education in Slovenia, in both Slovene and English?

(2) How well do these students understand the same content when presented in plain language, in Slovene and English?

(3) What are degree international students' general experiences with administrative texts in Slovenia?

The study uses a mixed-methods cross-sectional research design combining a reading comprehension test and a survey to collect both quantitative and qualitative data. In the study we used extracts from two original administrative texts, each available in the original Slovene and the translated English versions. For research purposes, the texts were labelled *Enrolment documentation* and *Dormitory application*. As this article focuses solely on the results of the first text, only details pertaining to *Enrolment documentation* are provided:

> **Enrolment documentation**: The extract "Dokazila o izpolnjevanju vpisnih pogojev" from the text *Informacije o prijavno-sprejemnem postopku za vpis v prvi letnik* / "Evidence of the fulfilment of the enrolment conditions" from the text *Information on admission procedure for enrolment into the first year*, published by the University of Ljubljana[5]

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5   The original Slovene text is taken from the brochure published on the following website: https://www.uni-lj.si/studij/dodiplomski-in-enoviti-magistrski-studij/razpis-za-vpis/drzavljani-drzav-neclanic-eu > Osnovne informacije – državljani držav nečlanic EU in Zahodnega Balkana; the original English text is taken from the brochure published on the following website: https://www.uni-lj.si/en/study/bachelors-and-single-cycle-masters-study/call-for-enrolment/citizens-of-non-eu-countries-who-have-completed-secondary-education-abroad > General information 2025/26 – citizens of non-EU and Western Balkans countries.

The texts were then manipulated to produce two sets of four texts for each topic:

(1) Original text in Slovene
(2) Original text in English
(3) Plain language text in Slovene, rewritten in accordance with the principles of plain language / clear writing
(4) Plain language text in English, rewritten in accordance with the principles of plain language / clear writing

A set of bilingual Slovene/English comprehension questions was developed for each topic and applied consistently across all four text versions. These were followed by a standardized set of demographic questions and a brief survey about students' general experiences with administrative texts in Slovenia. The participants were instructed to respond in Slovene, English, or their L1, depending on their preference. The complete test materials, including the introductory informed consent form, are provided in the appendix. Each participant received one original and one plain language version, yielding four distinct combinations. The reading comprehension test was administered in May 2025 using paper-based forms in classroom settings. The combinations were distributed in a pseudorandom manner to ensure balanced representation. Participants were students enrolled in Year Plus Slovene courses – an elective module provided at the University of Ljubljana (UL) that offers international students free Slovene language instruction during their first year. This is of crucial importance given that Slovene is the primary language of instruction at UL (Pirih Svetina, 2024; Stritar Kučuk and Pirih Svetina, 2024). Participation in the study was voluntary and anonymous.

A total of 112 students participated in the study. For the purposes of this paper, only the responses from students who completed the reading comprehension tests and the survey related to the *Enrolment documentation* text were analysed. The analysis focused exclusively on students with a South Slavic linguistic background, as they constitute the largest group of international degree students and are typically the only L2 speakers of Slovene capable of reaching B2 proficiency within their first year due to linguistic proximity. Responses from 105 students were included in the analysis: 64 (61%) identified

as female, 38 (36%) as male, and three (3%) as non-binary. As their L1, 44 (42%) reported speaking Serbian, 32 (30%) Macedonian, 14 (13%) Bosnian, nine (9%) Montenegrin, and six (6%) Croatian. The sample was diverse in terms of academic affiliation, with students representing 15 faculties and two academies (out of 23 faculties and three academies). The majority were BA students or enrolled in single-cycle MA programmes (86; 82%), while 19 (18%) were MA students.

The overall numbers of responses for the *Enrolment documentation* text are as listed in Table 1.

Table 1: *Number of responses*

Version	N=223	%
Enrolment documentation: Slovene original	26	11.7%
Enrolment documentation: Slovene plain	27	12.1%
Enrolment documentation: English original	27	12.1%
Enrolment documentation: English plain	32	14.3%

The data was processed manually. Responses to open-ended comprehension questions were coded into three categories: *Correct*, *Partially Correct*, and *Incorrect*. The analysis relied on descriptive statistical methods to summarize and interpret the findings.

7 Legalese in the sample text *Enrolment documentation*

An important observation regarding the Slovene and English original versions of the two texts is that although the English version might be expected to be a direct translation of the Slovene one, this is not always the case. A notable example from the *Enrolment documentation* text illustrates this discrepancy:

Slovene: *E-kopija ali fotografija listin/e o zaključenem izobraževanju v tujini, za katerega želijo, da se prizna za obravnavo v prijavno-sprejemnem postopku, brez legalizacije*

"E-copy or scan of the certificate(s) of completed education abroad which they [the applicants] want to be taken into consideration in the enrolment procedure, without legalization"

English: *E-copy/scan of the final certificate(s), representing general requirement for access to higher education in the country of issue without legalization*

In some cases, such differences may result in factual inconsistencies. For instance, the English version of the *Enrolment documentation* text requires copies of transcripts *for all years of pre-university education*, whereas the Slovene version specifies only high school transcripts. Such ambiguities may lead to significant frustrations in the enrolment process. Where there was ambiguity, we checked with the relevant authorities, so that the plain text versions only include information that was confirmed to be factually correct.

The original texts in both languages exhibit an attempt by the producers to make the content more comprehensible by employing clear organization with headings and bullet points as well as the use of bolding, italics, underlining and colours (e.g. the red heading in the *Enrolment documentation* text). While all of these options are available to organize space, simultaneous use of multiple formatting strategies can actually lead to confusion if it is not clear what function each one has. We anticipated that this might be the fact in the original versions of our texts too, but the original *Enrolment documentation* text is restrained in the use of formatting options and its use of all caps seems effective in drawing attention to a particular point. Graphic techniques such as tables and pictures are not used in the original texts, and they are also absent in the plain language versions, to keep a similar layout. One subtle but potentially impactful difference in the layout is that the plain language versions use more white space and larger indentations for bullet points, contributing to improved readability.

Table 2 gives an overview of quantitative measures of text complexity, with a comparison of the original and plain language versions. The number of paragraphs differs between the Slovene and English originals, with the English version containing five fewer. Given that predominance of bullet-point formatting, average paragraph length is a more meaningful measure than sentence length. The data shows that the average paragraph length in the plain language versions is nearly 50% less than in the original texts. This reflects a higher number of paragraphs in the plain texts as a consequence of enhanced bulleting.

Table 2: *Quantitative measures of text complexity*

Text	No. of words	No. of paragraphs	Average paragraph length	Longest paragraph (words)
Enrolment documentation: Slovene original	521	20	27.42	121
Enrolment documentation: Slovene plain	512	29	17.66	38
Enrolment documentation: English original	627	15	41.80	108
Enrolment documentation: English plain	601	26	23.12	73

The original and plain texts are mostly structured according to the subject-verb-object order. The passive voice is used frequently in the English original version (e.g. *the copy shall be verified* in *Enrolment documentation*), but is rare in the Slovene original (e.g. *bo pozvan*). This reflects the limited use of the passive voice in Slovene, where the active voice is preferred and impersonal constructions can be employed (e.g. *prijavitelja se pozove*). In the plain language versions, the passive is mostly replaced with the active voice (e.g. *Po prijavi vas lahko prosijo za dodatna dokazila ali za vpogled v originale dokumentov*), but is kept in some cases in English where the structure is idiomatic and relatively transparent (e.g. *You can be asked for additional documents*).[6]

Although legal language is characterized by a high number of nominalizations, this characteristic is not particularly prominent in the original texts. In the plain language versions, the wording sometimes employs more verbal forms (e.g. *Documentation required for enrolment* instead of *Evidence of the fulfilment of the enrolment conditions)*. Where feasible, the plain versions also adopt more concrete language, including concrete vocabulary instead of abstract vocabulary and syntactically simpler structures, as for instance in the example below. Note that although the plain language texts are generally either the same length or shorter, these kinds of changes sometimes require more words.

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6   See Rastelli (2025, Ch. 3) for an overview of different arguments regarding the comprehensibility of passives.

Original: *E-copy/scan of short chronological description of the entire education, relevant to the enrolment application and recognition procedure of foreign education, prepared by the applicant.*

Plain: *Description of your education: In your own words describe your education so far that is relevant to your university studies. The description should be brief, chronological, with exact years (from when until when).*

On a lexical level, the original texts contain many instances of legal jargon, in both Slovene and English. Some examples are shown below:

Slovene: *legalizacija, pristojni organ, ugotavljanje istovetnosti, verodostojnost listine, izvirna listina, država izvora, izdajatelj, sodno overjeni dokument, opravljene obveznosti, potrjen s strani, dokazila, postopek priznavanja izobraževanja, biti pozvan*

English: *fulfilment, enrolment conditions, legalization, country of issue, applicant, certified translation, to verify the authenticity of the document, to undergo the recognition procedure of foreign qualifications*

In some cases, the jargon was kept where a paraphrase might cause more issues in comprehension, although the structure may have been simplified (e.g. *certified translation > needs to be translated by a certified translator*). Most of the time, such items were simply dropped – for practical purposes, there does not seem to be a difference in understanding, for instance, between *original certificate legalized according to the system of legalization in the country of issue* and *original certificate*.

The English original uses the modal verb *shall*, typical of legal language (e.g. *shall be verified*). The Slovene original also includes formal expressions, for instance *v kolikor* (instead of *če* for 'if'). Where appropriate, such items were replaced in the plain language versions with more familiar alternatives, although they often became unnecessary as the broader context was simplified (e.g. *V kolikor visokošolski zavod ne bo mogel potrditi verodostojnosti listine, se bo kandidate pozvalo, naj pošljejo* was replaced with *Po prijavi vas lahko prosijo za dodatna dokazila*).

8   Results and discussion

The results of the reading comprehension test and accompanying short survey on texts related to university enrolment documentation revealed several key findings. Among UL students who participated, the plain language versions – both in Slovene and in English – were found to be understood much better than the original versions. Comprehension questions received 68.8% correct answers for the Slovene plain version, closely followed by the English plain version at 67.2%. With 55.8%, the Slovene original text was considerably better understood than the English original version with only 34% correct responses. These results clearly indicate that plain language substantially improves comprehension, regardless of the language used. However, the disparity between the Slovene and English original versions also warrants attention.

In the case of the selected text – *Enrolment documentation* – which all applicants are confronted with when applying, participants with a South Slavic linguistic background demonstrated better understanding of the Slovene version than either English version. This finding should be interpreted with caution: the participants completed the comprehension test during their Slovene language classes and at a time when they had already spent eight months in Slovenia, receiving weekly Slovene instruction. Nevertheless, the results suggest that supporting international students in acquiring Slovene may be more beneficial than relying solely on English-language materials. These findings also invite reflection on the assumption that internationalization of the Slovene academic environment necessarily entails a shift toward English as the dominant language of instruction, as the initial results of this study suggest otherwise.

Table 3 shows the accuracy of the answers to all six questions in the test (see appendix).

Table 3: *Answers on the reading comprehension test*

No.	SLO orig (n=26)			SLO plain (n=24)			ENG orig (n=25)			ENG plain (n=30)		
	Corr	Inc	Part	Corr	Inc	Part	Corr	Inc	Part	Corr	Inc	Part
1	22 (84.6%)	4 (15.4%)		22 (91.6%)	2 (8.3%)		16 (64%)	9 (36%)		29 (96.6%)	1 (3.3%)	
2	4 (15.5%)	12 (46%)	10 (38.5%)	8 (33.3%)	2 (8.3%)	14 (58.3%)	6 (24%)	12 (48%)	7 (28%)	20 (66.7%)	4 (13.3%)	6 (2%)
3	11 (42.3%)	4 (15.4%)	11 (42.3%)	8 (33.3%)	11 (45.8%)	5 (20.8%)	2 (8%)	11 (44%)	11 (44%)	1 (3.3%)	14 (46.7%)	15 (50%)
4	24 (92.3%)	2 (7.7%)		24 (100%)	/		16 (64%%)	9 (36%)		29 (96.7%)	1 (3.3%)	
5	10 (38.5%)	16 (61.5%)		19 (79.2%)	5 (2.8%)		2 (8%)	23 (92%)		23 (76.7%)	7 (23.3%)	
6	16 (61.5%)	10 (38.5%)	/	18 (75%)	6 (25%)	/	9 (36%)	14 (56%)	2 (8%)	19 (63.3%)	9 (3%)	2 (6.7%)

A comparison of the results for both Slovene versions of the text reveals notable differences in comprehension. For Question 1, the distribution of responses is relatively similar across the original and plain versions, but it is evident that there are fewer incorrect answers for the plain version of the text (15.4% vs. 8.3%). In Question 2, the original version resulted in 46% incorrect, 38.5% partially correct, and only 15.5% correct answers. In contrast, the plain version showed a marked improvement: only 8.3% incorrect, 33.3% correct, and 58.3% partially correct responses. Question 4 further supports this, as both versions produced relatively high scores, indicating that less complex information is accessible regardless of plain vs. original language variety. The results for Questions 5 and 6 likewise demonstrate better and easier comprehension for the plain version of the text, with a consistent trend toward more correct and fewer incorrect answers.

The results for the English versions are slightly different. In Question 1, the rate of incorrect answers is moderate (36%) for the original and minimal (3.3%) for the plain version. Question 2 highlights a significant gap in comprehension: only 24% of responses were correct for the original version, compared to nearly 68% for the plain version. In Question 4, the number of incorrect answers decreased drastically from nine (36%) in the original to only one (3.3%) in the plain version. The results for Question 5 show a reversed ratio between correct and incorrect answers, again favouring the plain version. Finally, Question 6 shows that the proportion of partially correct answers remained the same, but the rate of incorrect responses dropped sharply from 56% in the original to just 3% in the plain version.

In both language versions, the results for Question 3 proved to be unexpected, prompting further analysis and interpretation. Surprisingly, the plain language version appeared more difficult to understand than the original. In the Slovene texts, for instance, almost 46% of answers in the plain version were incorrect, compared to only 15.4% for the original. Specifically, Question 3 asked: *Which faculties require a certificate of proficiency in Slovene at level B2 for at least one of their programmes? Tick the boxes before all such faculties as shown in the example.* In the task, the Academy of Theatre, Radio, Film and Television was pre-marked with a check mark on the list of all UL

members as an example, and participants were expected to identify nine additional faculties. Only answers which marked all nine were considered correct, while responses with four to eight correct selections were classified as partially correct. All answers with fewer than four correct selections were deemed incorrect, along with responses that included incorrect selections.

The findings suggest that the participants struggled more with questions requiring multi-component answers, as was the case with Question 3. A key distinction between the original and plain language versions lies in their layout and formatting. In the original Slovene and English texts, information regarding study programmes requiring a certificate of Slovene proficiency is presented in a single, extended paragraph (with paragraph lengths of 121 and 107, respectively). In contrast, the plain language versions follow the principle of breaking the text down into several paragraphs – with the same information spread out across two bullet points (with paragraph lengths of 20/26 and 38/44 words), and a separate paragraph (25/34 words) pointing out a special requirement for the Faculty of Medicine. This structural difference had a notable impact on task performance. In the original texts, the participants could locate all relevant information within one paragraph, whereas the plain language versions required navigation across three distinct sections. On the other hand, highlighting the Faculty of Medicine's requirements improved the scores on Question 4 in the plain language versions.

A detailed analysis of partially correct responses reveals an additional layout-related issue. In the Slovene plain language version, six respondents selected only the faculties listed in the first paragraph (faculties which require a Slovene certificate for all study programmes) while overlooking the following two paragraphs (one listing faculties which require a Slovene certificate for some study programmes and another detailing the specific case of the Faculty of Medicine). However, this pattern was not present in the English plain language version. One plausible explanation is the difference in textual presentation: the Slovene version listed faculties in running text (e.g. *Novinarstvo na Fakulteti za družbene vede*), while the English version gave the programmes in running text and the faculties in parentheses, possibly

making them stand out more. It is worth pointing out that Question 3 may have been rather non-authentic (Ferbežar, 2016) from the respondents' perspective. In real-life scenarios, applicants are unlikely to be concerned with how many faculties require Slovene proficiency; they are typically interested only in whether their chosen faculty or programme has such a requirement.

In addition to answering comprehension questions, the participants were also asked to rate the overall comprehensibility of the texts. These self-assessments generally aligned with the reading comprehension results, although the participants tended to rate their understanding higher than their actual performance. Both the Slovene and English plain language versions received the same score of 7.1 out of 8 (meaning "I understood everything"). This suggests that students perceived both plain texts as equally and highly comprehensible, compared with 68.8% and 67.2% correct answers, respectively. The original Slovene version received a lower average score of 6.1 (vs. 55.8% correct answers), and the original English version was rated lowest at 5.5 (vs. 34% correct answers). These results reinforce the earlier finding that the variety of the selected language used in the text – plain vs. original – is even more important than the language itself (Slovene vs. English).

The survey also included the question: *How positive or negative was your experience when you submitted your e-application to study in Slovenia?* Participants rated their experience on a scale from 1 (*very negative*) to 8 (*very positive*), with an average score of 5.9. This suggests that students generally viewed the application process more positively than negatively, though there remains room for improvement. A first step in the process might be to introduce plain versions of the *Enrolment documentation* texts, and in general the introduction of plain language versions of key documentation may help reduce confusion and improve the overall experience for international applicants.

9   Conclusion

The findings of this study highlight that language choice plays a significant role in text comprehension – specifically, Slovene was better understood than English by University of Ljubljana students who are L1

speakers of South Slavic languages. However, the results also underscore the broader need to improve the accessibility of administrative and legal texts for diverse user groups. This is particularly critical in the context of university enrolment, a high-stakes process with substantial implications for international applicants. In such situations the observation that "plain language writing benefits all readers while ensuring crucial access for some" (Myers and Martin, 2021) is especially relevant.

It should be noted that these results represent only the initial phase of the study. A qualitative analysis of responses to the final open-ended question – *What was the most difficult part of the application and admission process (e-application) for studying in Slovenia for you? Did you need additional information or was the published information sufficient?* – will provide a deeper insight into the difficulties of the process itself and the challenges faced by applicants. The fact that the study involves only one type of text is also an important limitation. In the continuation of the project, the analysis will be complemented by results from the second text used in the study (*Dormitory application*), with a similar test and survey. Given the different nature of this text, it might yield different findings, and the combined results across text types and language versions will help mitigate the impact of individual participant characteristics. These results will be instrumental in developing explicit recommendations for institutional practice, such as measures universities should adopt to improve communication with international students.

The issues discussed in this paper relate closely to the notion of functional literacy (e.g. Loberger, 2007), the minimum literacy required for an individual to be able to participate in social life, including navigating administrative texts. Previous research has shown that even education students at the University of Ljubljana may struggle with such texts in their native language (Skubic, 2010), and experimental studies elsewhere (e.g. Rastelli, 2025, Ch. 13) likewise suggest that complex texts may significantly affect the life experiences of individuals with average literacy skills. Future research could therefore extend this study to include a comparison with L1 speakers and their understanding of administrative and legal texts, a direction already explored in the Slovene context by Ina Ferbežar (2012).

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Razumi, če moreš: preprost upravni jezik in bralno razumevanje v slovenščini in angleščini med mednarodnimi študenti na Univerzi v Ljubljani

Avtorici v prispevku proučujeva razumevanje administrativnih besedil med mednarodnimi študenti UL, pri čemer primerjava razumevanje besedila o vpisu na UL v izvirni slovenski in angleški različici z različicama, prilagojenima v skladu s smernicami za razumljivi jezik. V raziskavi je sodelovalo 105 študentov, ki so domači govorci bližnjih južnoslovanskih jezikov. Opravili so preizkus bralnega razumevanja štirih različic istega besedila in izpolnili anketo.

Rezultati kažejo, da različice v razumljivem jeziku bistveno izboljšajo razumevanje: slovenska razumljiva različica je prinesla 68,8 % pravilnih odgovorov in angleška 67,2 %, medtem ko sta izvirni različici dosegli 55,8 % oziroma 34 %. Slovenska besedila so bila bolje razumljena kot angleška, vendar je razlika med izvirnimi in razumljivimi različicami večja od razlike med jezikoma. Ugotovitve potrjujejo pomen razumljivega jezika tudi za pravičnejši dostop mednarodnih študentov do nujnih informacij, nadaljnje faze raziskave pa bodo razširjene na druge tipe besedil in kvalitativne podatke.

Ključne besede: razumljiv jezik, jasnopisje, upravna besedila, slovenščina kot J2, angleščina kot J2, funkcionalna pismenost