

The comprehensibility of plain language for second
language speakers of English at a South African college of
further education and training

by

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DECLARATION

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April 2019

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ABSTRACT

Plain language has existed in various forms and guises for more than 2000 years (Garner 2009: 40-41; Petelin 2010: 207). Although no consensus exists on a single definition of ‘plain language’ or how best to achieve plain language, plain language is a purportedly effective means for improving communication. The use of plain language is commonplace in many countries, like the United States and the United Kingdom, and might be considered beneficial to citizens by virtue of the fact that many governments legislate its use.

South Africa is one of the countries that has embraced plain language by incorporating it into various pieces of legislation in an effort to protect the consumer. However, the South African population generally has low literacy and education levels, and the majority of the population has an L1 other than English, the language in which most documents in the financial and other service-delivery sectors appear. What is considered plain English by L1 speakers of English may differ significantly from what second language (L2) speakers of English consider plain language (Cutts 2013). However, insufficient information exists on the effectiveness of plain English for speakers of L1s other than English (Lee 2014; Thrush 2001). Furthermore, the ability of plain language to render comprehensible English texts in contexts of multilingualism and multiculturalism warrants investigation (Cornelius 2015) – an important consideration in South Africa where English is the lingua franca of the multilingual, multicultural population.

This study investigated the comprehensibility of a plain English text for non-L1 speakers of English. The participants were L1 speakers of Afrikaans, English and isiXhosa at a Western Cape college of further education and training, which has English as sole language of learning and teaching. An authentic text on the topic of funeral insurance, which is germane to a large portion of the population (Finmark South Africa 2016: 5), was selected and an analysis of the text revealed that it was a plain English text.

The cloze test procedure was selected as the method of analysis. This is a commonly used technique which determines the test-taker’s comprehension of written language. A cloze test was employed in which every seventh word was deleted from the text; participants were given the text with 100 deletions indicated on the page and were required to fill in the missing words.

The results of the study indicate that all three L1 groups (Afrikaans, English and isiXhosa) showed poor comprehension of the text (average scores for the three groups combined were <50%), but that the comprehension of the English L1 speakers was better than that of the English L2 speakers, although not statistically significantly so in the case of the L1 Afrikaans groups. This suggests that the criteria or guidelines for writing in such a way that the resultant text is plain (which were developed for and tested with English L1 speakers in countries in which English is the most widely spoken L1, such as the United States and United Kingdom), is not sufficient for the South African context where English is the lingua franca and the language of preference, but the L1 of less than 10% of the population (Statistics South Africa 2012: 24).

The inadequacy of some of the plain language techniques can serve as an immediate warning to plain language practitioners to avoid a blanket, uncritical application of these guidelines as they do not necessarily cater sufficiently for South African target audiences, particularly those who need them most.

OPSOMMING

Gewone taal (sogenaamde ‘plain language’) bestaan al vir meer as 2000 jaar in verskillende vorme (Garner 2009: 40-41; Petelin 2010: 207). Alhoewel daar nie konsensus is oor die definisie van ‘gewone taal’ of hoe om gewone taal te bewerkstellig nie, is die gebruik van gewone taal ’n skynbaar effektiewe manier om kommunikasie te verbeter. Die gebruik van gewone taal is algemeen in baie lande, soos in die Verenigde State of in die Verenigde Koninkryk, en kan beskou word as voordelig vir burgers weens die feit dat baie regerings die gebruik daarvan in wetgewing ingeskryf het.

Suid-Afrika is een van die lande wat die gebruik van gewone taal voorstaan en dit in verskillende wette ingesluit het in ’n poging om die verbruiker te beskerm. Die Suid-Afrikaanse bevolking het egter oor die algemeen lae geletterdheids- en onderwysvlakke, en die meerderheid van die bevolking het ’n eerste taal (T1) wat nie Engels is nie, terwyl Engels die taal is waarin die meeste dokumente in die finansiële en ander diensleweringsektore verskyn. Wat beskou word as gewone Engels deur T1-sprekers van die taal, kan aansienlik verskil van wat tweedetaal- (T2) sprekers van Engels as gewone taal bestempel (Cutts 2013). Onvoldoende inligting bestaan egter oor die doeltreffendheid van gewone Engels vir T1-sprekers van tale buiten Engels (Lee 2014; Thrush 2001). Voorts word navorsing verlang oor die vermoë van gewone taal om verstaanbare Engelse tekste te lewer in kontekste van veeltaligheid en multikulturalisme (Cornelius 2015) – ’n belangrike oorweging in Suid-Afrika waar Engels die lingua franca van die veeltalige, multikulturele bevolking is.

Hierdie studie ondersoek die verstaanbaarheid van ’n teks in gewone Engels vir nie-T1-sprekers van Engels. Die deelnemers was T1-sprekers van Afrikaans, Engels en isiXhosa by ’n Wes-Kaapse kollege vir verdere onderwys en opleiding, wat Engels as enigste taal van leer en onderrig het. ’n Bestaande teks oor begrafnisversekering, wat relevant tot ’n groot deel van die bevolking is (Finmark South Africa 2016: 5), is gekies en ’n analise van die teks het aangetoon dat dit ’n teks in gewone Engels was.

’n Invultoets-prosedure (‘cloze test procedure’) is as analisemetode gebruik. Dit is ‘n algemeen gebruikte tegniek wat die toetsafnemer se begrip van geskrewe taal meet. ’n Invultoets is gebruik waarin elke sewende woord uit die teks verwyder is. Deelnemers het die

teks met 100 weglatings wat op die bladsy aangedui is, ontvang en moes die ontbrekende woorde invul.

Die resultate van die studie dui aan dat al drie T1-groepe (Afrikaans, Engels en isiXhosa) swak begrip van die teks getoon het (gemiddelde tellings vir die drie groepe saam was <50%), maar dat die begrip van die T1-sprekers van Engels beter was as dié van die T2-sprekers van Engels (maar nie statisties beduidend in die geval van die Afrikaanse groep nie). Dit dui daarop dat die kriteria of riglyne vir skryf wat op só ‘n manier geskeid dat die teks wat ontstaan, in gewone Engels is (wat ontwikkel is vir en getoets is met T1 Engelssprekendes in lande waarin Engels die mees wydgesproke T1 is, soos die Verenigde State en die Verenigde Koninkryk), nie voldoende is vir die Suid-Afrikaanse konteks nie waar Engels die lingua franca en die voorkeurtaal is, maar die T1 van minder as 10% van die bevolking.

Die ontoereikendheid van sommige van die gewonetaaltegnieke kan as onmiddellike waarskuwing aan gewonetaalpraktisyns dien om ‘n onkritiese sambreltoepassing van hierdie riglyne te vermy, aangesien dit nie noodwendig voldoen aan die behoeftes van alle Suid-Afrikaanse teikengehore nie, spesifiek nie diegene wat gewone taal die nodigste het nie.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background and problem statement

With more people than ever conversing in the English language – an estimated 1.12 billion English speakers across the globe (Crystal 2008: 5) – plain English has become an increasingly pertinent and topical field. The English language is no longer the sole domain of its first language (L1) speakers – the number of second language (L2) speakers of English is currently double that of the L1 speakers (Simons & Fennig 2018). Not all non-L1 speakers of English have high levels of proficiency in the language and facilitating effective communication in English for the many people who are compelled to use it as a second or third language merely to be able to function in society, is an urgent and critical obligation that exists in many countries. South Africa is no exception.

One way in which many countries are attempting to address this obligation is through the introduction of plain language in texts such as documents produced by financial and other service-providing industries. In 1995, Dullah Omar, South Africa's Minister of Justice, brought plain language to the fore, referring to it as ‘democratising language’, when he delivered a seminar titled ‘Plain language, the law and the right to information’ (Burt 2009: 42). What followed was the promulgation of a number of laws that required information to be made available to consumers in plain language (Burt 2009: 42). The focus was on consumers as this group was considered most at risk and in the greatest need of protection from the non-plain information provided by the businesses in the country. Furthermore, in the aftermath of apartheid, *all* of South Africa’s consumers needed to have equitable access to the products and services provided by such businesses.

While the adoption of this ‘protectionist legislation’ appears to go a long way towards redressing the imbalances of the country’s apartheid past (Burt 2009: 42), it may well be a short-sighted solution for the multilingual South African population that it seeks to uplift. If the adoption of plain language does not facilitate a clearer understanding of English texts for all South African language groups, particularly L2 English speakers, then the legislation has not served the people it intends to protect.

Thrush (2009: 290) explains with respect to the principles behind plain language that “[m]ost of these ‘principles of clear writing’ were developed through research conducted with native speakers of American English” and she more strikingly notes: “I have been able to find little

evidence of the effects of these principles on readers whose native language is something other than English and whose English may be less than completely fluent”.

As a result, in a country with eleven official languages and a functional literacy (basic reading and writing skills) rate of 89% (Stoop and Chürr 2013: 533), it becomes even more critical to establish whether plain language indeed addresses the needs of multilingual and multicultural target audiences and, by doing so, levels the playing field.

Despite having its critics, research has shown that there are many benefits to using plain language, including that it is preferred by readers and it results in increased comprehensibility (Mazur 2000: 206), but is this the case for L2 English speakers in the South African environment?

According to Greenberg’s diversity index, South Africa is the 19th most linguistically diverse country out of a total of 232 countries (Simons & Fennig 2018). The level of linguistic diversity in South Africa varies according to geographical area, with greater linguistic diversity in and around big cities and close to the borders in the north-eastern part of the country and less linguistic diversity in the rural areas (Statistics South Africa 2012). Despite the country’s linguistic diversity, English is the default language choice in South Africa (Brenzinger 2017: 50) because English is considered to be the language of opportunity and consequently “fluency in English is a prerequisite for career advancement and also an indispensable requirement for performing well in the educational system” (Brenzinger 2017: 50). However, Brenzinger contends that “for most South Africans [English is] a divisive and excluding linguistic barrier” (Brenzinger 2017: 49). This is evidenced by “a large disparity between native English speakers and...students speaking English as a second language on international test scores, with only English native speakers scoring above average on reading tests of each language” (Hazeltine 2013: 27). So, the question that needs to be posed is to what extent plain English is a reasonable solution to the problem of inaccessibility of English-language texts to non-L1 English speakers.

This sets the backdrop to the issue to be investigated in this study: In a country where the majority of the population speak English as an L2 or L3, but English is seen as the language of opportunity and is used as a lingua franca, does and to what extent does, the use of plain English improve comprehensibility of English texts for non-native speakers of English?

1.2 Aims and objectives of the study

The aim of this study is to spark debate about the extent of the effectiveness of plain English in the South African context. The prescription of plain language (set up for use in other English-speaking countries) in various pieces of South African legislation presupposes the usefulness of plain English, but there is no evidence from the South African context supporting this. Relatedly, this study aims to serve as a stimulus to language practitioners to question the efficacy of the existing international plain language principles and not to apply them indiscriminately, but to critically assess their applicability – especially to the largely non-native speakers of English.

Using a plainly written English text sourced from the public domain, the study aims to ascertain whether a difference exists between the level of comprehensibility for L1 Afrikaans and L1 isiXhosa speakers compared to that of the control group, L1 English speakers. This will indicate whether the use of plain English is a sufficient means to ensure the comprehensibility of English texts for South Africa's non-native English speakers. Consequently, it will be possible to infer whether the laws that 'democratise' the country through language do so for all its citizens based on the reality of their language repertoires.

In addition, the features of the text are analysed – a plain English text according to generally agreed-upon international guidelines (see section 2.2.1) – with the aim of:

- ascertaining the plainness of the text,
- establishing whether any of the plain language techniques employed would in theory enhance the comprehensibility of the text or impair it,¹ and
- determining whether the application of these techniques make the text sufficiently plain for the intended South African audience.

1.3 Research question

Using plain English in its current form in South Africa as a panacea for the poor literacy levels of the vast majority of its citizens (in their L1 and in English as their L2) (Posel &

¹ Note that whether or not the techniques enhance or impair the comprehensibility of the text can only be determined by comprehension testing with participants; I am just referring here to the potential of the techniques to influence comprehensibility.

Zeller 2010: 5; Pienaar 2002: 146) may be doing these citizens a disservice. The research question that guides the study is as follows:

Do L1 speakers of Afrikaans and isiXhosa comprehend a purportedly plain-English text as well as their English mother tongue counterparts do?

Although the focus of the study was on L2 speakers of English, the research participants also comprised L1 English speakers. Consequently, it was possible to test the hypotheses that:

- L1 English speakers will perform better on a plain English cloze test than their L2 English counterparts,
- The extent to which L1 English speakers will outperform their L2 English counterparts will be statistically significant, and
- L1 English speakers will demonstrate a good level of comprehension of the text.²

1.4 Methodology

The first step in this study was to select a plain English text. Using a text that the audience may well encounter in ‘real life’, may add to the ecological validity of the research. Consequently, the text was sourced from an industry that has a high need to communicate with a large and linguistically diverse portion of the population, namely the insurance industry. The text was analysed before commencing the study according to generally agreed-upon guidelines (see section 2.2.1) to ensure that it is indeed a plain-English text and to examine the techniques used to render it a plain language text. The study then made use of a cloze test to determine the comprehensibility of the plain English text. This was done by having the cloze test completed by students from a college of further education and training in the Western Cape, of which the sole language of learning and teaching is English. These

² The question arises as to what ‘good comprehension’ would entail. Specifically, what score would indicate good comprehension? This is a difficult question to answer, because it might differ across groups depending on whether they are L1 or L2 speakers of English. In this study, a text from the insurance industry was employed. Given that the insurance industry compiles information texts with the ultimate purpose of selling insurance policies to the public, and that legislation requires them to treat customers fairly, one would assume that insurance companies aim for near perfect comprehension of the content of their information texts. Such comprehension would imply that the client understands what s/he is purchasing, how much it will cost, and how it will benefit them, and thus enters the transaction informed. Whereas one might expect less than perfect comprehension by non-L1 speakers of English, one would still expect the reader to understand close to 100% of what was read, given that this information forms the basis on which a long-lasting financial decision will be taken. For this reason, I would have considered scores of 85–100% as indications of good comprehension.

students are L1 Afrikaans, English and isiXhosa speakers. The results of the cloze test were then analysed according to various variables obtained from a language background questionnaire, including:³

- the participants' L1
- their LOLT while still at school,
- the number of years that they had been speaking English,
- their level of education, and
- whether or not they had completed Grade 12.

1.5 Key terminology used in this thesis

For the purposes of this study, there is no distinction between the terms 'plain language' and 'plain English' and they are thus used interchangeably in this thesis. I use the term 'plain English' to retain a focus on the fact that English (an L2 or L3 for most South Africans) is the language under investigation in this study.

'Mother tongue' and 'first language' (L1) are used interchangeably for the purposes of this study.

'Language of learning and teaching' (LOLT) refers to the medium of instruction used in a school or other educational institution, i.e. to the language used in the classroom by the teacher/lecturer and the learners/students for teaching, classwork and assessment purposes.

In the mid-twentieth century Taylor (1953: 416) defined a cloze unit as "any single occurrence of a successful attempt to reproduce accurately a part deleted from a 'message' (any language product), by deciding from the context that remains, what the missing part should be". Therefore, a 'cloze test' is a method of measuring the readability of a text by deleting words from the passage that the test takers need to fill in by using their understanding of the text to identify an acceptable response. Cloze tests are used to determine knowledge of a language as opposed to knowledge of a subject (see section 3.5).

³ In the thesis, I will be making use of plain language conventions as far as possible. One such convention is the use of vertical lists instead of lists embedded in paragraphs. Another is the reduction of unnecessary information. As list numbers are deemed unnecessary when no cross-reference is made in the text to listed items, I will be making use of bulleted instead of numbered lists throughout.

1.6 The structure of the thesis

This thesis is divided into five chapters. This chapter, Chapter 1, gave some background information on the topic of plain English, outlined the aims of the study, articulated the research question, gave a brief overview of the methodology employed in the study and describes the structure of the thesis.

In Chapter 2, from a survey of the literature available on plain English, I provide an overview of the concept's 2000-year history, beginning with the orators of Ancient Rome and Greece and weaving through the centuries to the more recent history of the Plain Language Movement in the late 20th century. A glimpse at the status of plain language in selected Australasian, European, North American, and South Asian countries provides an indication of the scope of plain language around the world. Next, I contemplate a range of definitions for 'plain language' from some of the field's most respected members before discussing the most common guidelines proposed for the realisation of plain language and the three approaches to plain language (Schriever 1989b). An examination of the viewpoints of the plain language advocates and the critics thereof follows. The South African context is then discussed, focusing on the country's legislation and linguistic landscape, before ending with a review of plain language in relation to non-native speakers.

Chapter 3 focuses on the methodology employed in this study. I explain who the participants were and how they came to participate. I explain my selection of the text and its relevance to the South African audience before analysing the text according to generally agreed-upon plain language principles (Cutts 2013; Petelin 2010; Schiess 2003–2004; Butt 2002; Kimble 1992). The cloze test method, used to determine the comprehensibility of the text, is discussed before I outline the procedure used to collect the data. I explain how the test was scored and how the data was analysed before considering ethical matters and the methodological challenges of the study.

Chapter 4 explores the results of the study. I explain how the responses were scored on the cloze test, the variables that were considered and how the data was analysed according to individual and combined variables. I then conduct an in-depth analysis of the responses yielded in the cloze test using plain language techniques that can be investigated due to their observability. The chapter ends with a discussion of the self-assessment results obtained from the language background questionnaires (see Appendix C) completed by the participants.

Chapter 5 concludes the thesis with a summary of the findings and considers factors that may have contributed to the results of the study, including the plainness of the text and the English language proficiency of the participants. I answer the research question before outlining the limitations of the study and proposing recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 The history of plain language

Plain language has a long and consistent history. Politicians, philosophers, writers, lawyers and housewives, to name a few, have over the centuries called for more effective, simple and clear communication to be conveyed by plain language (Cutts 2013). In the oral culture of fourth and fifth century BCE Greece and Rome, the art of public speaking, or oratory, was a prized skill. As Garner (2009:40–41) explains:

From classical Greek and Roman times, two literary traditions have grown alongside each other. One, a florid oratorical style called Asiatic prose, sported elaborate antitheses, complicated syntax, and correspondences in sense and sound. The other, Attic prose, was refined conversation: concise, restrained, shorn of intricacy.

It was at this time that the concept of plain language originated with the move away from the ornate and elaborate Asiatic style towards the Attic style of speaking. According to Petelin (2010: 207), the Attic style – the precursor to plain language – was characterised as “active, direct, forceful and exemplified by purity and simplicity”.

After William of Normandy defeated the English King Harold at the Battle of Hastings in 1066, French became the dominant language in England alongside Latin. However, in 1362 the Statute of Pleading was enacted by Parliament as “what might be considered as the first plain English law” (Tiersma n.d.), due to the need to conduct the legal process, which was still conducted in French, in the language spoken by the common people who were being tried by this process – English.

Shortly afterwards, in the 14th century, Geoffrey Chaucer wrote his Canterbury Tales in English at a time when Latin and French were also typically used as the languages of literature. As Cutts (2013: xxvii) notes, even at this time in the early development of the English language, one of Chaucer’s characters famously says:

Speketh so pleyne at this time, I yow preye / That we may understande what ye seye.
 Speak[-]you so plainly, for this time, I [you] pray, / That we can understand what[-]things you say.
 (Nicolson 2015)
 ‘Speak so plainly, for this time, I pray, / That we can understand what you say’

The Office of the Scottish Parliamentary Counsel's 'Plain Language and Legislation Booklet' (cited in Gouws 2010: 79) claims that the need for plain language arose again in the sixteenth century when King Edward VI called for "superfluous and tedious statutes ... [to be] made more plain and short, to the intent that men might better understand them".

In the early 17th century, Robert Cawdrey compiled an English-to-English dictionary that used plain English words in order to help those who were not versed in languages like Latin, French and Greek; making the English of the day more accessible to those who were expected to speak it (Cutts 2013: xxviii). Also in the 17th century, plain language became an important tenet in religion. Cutts (2013: xxviii) reports that the Quakers, in order to reflect their purity, favoured "a simple style of writing and speaking that they called plain language".

In the 19th century, the American author Mark Twain said that the best way to write clear English is to use "plain, simple language, short words and brief sentences" (Cutts 2013: xxix).

During WWII, Winston Churchill wrote a memorandum "called Brevity that told his civil servants he wanted shorter, clearer, jargon-free reports" (Cutts 2013: xxix), and later in the 1940s Sir Ernest Gowers was commissioned by the National Treasury to write a guide advising civil servants how to combat officialese. His first book 'Plain Words' and his second book 'ABC of Plain Words' were later combined to form 'The Complete Plain Words' (Encyclopedia.com 2016), a guide "encouraging clear writing in the civil service and elsewhere" (Cutts 2013: xxx).

The call for plain language did not only occur in England and the English-speaking world. According to Asprey (n.d.: 23), in 1713 the King of Sweden proclaimed that "the Royal Chancellery in all written documents endeavour to write in clear, plain Swedish and not to use, as far as possible, foreign words".

2.1.1 Modern history

The modern history of plain language started in 1953 with writer Stuart Chase criticising the 'gobbledygook' used in texts (Mazur 2000: 205). From there, it can be traced to the latter half of the twentieth century when the 'Plain Language Movements' of the United States (US) and of the United Kingdom (UK) led to a drive for organisations to plainly write texts intended for the consumer (Cornelius 2015: 3).

In the US, the call for plain language stemmed from the consumer movement of the 1960s; "[a]s consumers grew increasingly skeptical [sic] of government and big business, they began

to demand contracts that they could read and understand" (Bowen, Duffy & Steinberg 1986: 156).

The turning point for plain language in the US came in the 1970s when Citibank issued a loan agreement in plain English (Cutts 2013: xiv; Petelin 2010: 207). It drew attention to how plain language could benefit the consumer by providing information in a clear and easy-to-understand way and led to laws on plain language being passed at the federal and state level. President Carter subsequently issued two executive orders, in 1978 and 1979 respectively, that federal laws and government forms be clearer and simpler (Petelin 2010: 208).

In 1998, President Clinton issued a memorandum calling for all writing by the US federal government to be in plain language (Cutts 2013: xv). In the same year, the US Securities and Exchange Commission issued a free plain language guide as it "instructed corporations to write key parts of stock and bond prospectuses...in plain language" (Cutts 2013: xvi).

In 2008, the US House of Representatives proposed the Plain Language in Communications Act, asserting that although "[a] few agencies still maintain plain language programs...efforts to promote plain language [had] waned" (Plain Language in Government Communications Act of 2008, H.R. 3548—110th Congress of the United States of America; see www.GovTrack.us). However, this Act was not signed into law, and it was only two years later, in 2010 when President Obama passed the Plain Writing Act, that government bodies became compelled to write "most kinds of federal-government information...in plain language" (Cutts 2013: xvi).

The modern plain language movement in the UK caught the government's attention in the 1970s. The term 'plain language' appears for the first time in British law in the Consumer Credit Act 1974, which requires credit-reference agencies to provide their customers with their information in language they can understand (Cutts 2013: xix). By 1982, Prime Minister Thatcher's government had issued a policy statement "ordering departments for the first time to count their forms, abolish unnecessary ones, clarify the rest, and report their progress annually to the prime minister" (Cutts 2013: xvii).

Petelin (2010: 210) explains that most of the UK's bills and acts since 1998 make use of simpler terminology and are accompanied by explanatory notes. In 2009, the Local Government Association released a list of 200 words that they planned to withdraw from their communications in order to speak to their audience in a language they could understand

(Petelin 2010: 211). Words identified in this list include ‘actioned’, ‘capacity’, ‘customer’, ‘dialogue’, ‘facilitate’, ‘leverage’, ‘output’ and ‘potentialities’ (BBC News 2009).

2.1.2 Plain language around the world

As explained above, plain language in the US and the UK was driven to prominence in more recent years by consumer movements. This has not been the case in all countries, although Penman (1993: 121) made the assertion twenty-five years ago that “a plain language policy has been adopted by all the major English-speaking countries in the world and is even penetrating into non-English speaking countries, such as Japan”. A brief description of plain language in a selection of countries from around the world follows below.

2.1.2.1 In Australasia

Australia – Australia has been a pioneer in the adoption of plain language. The tone was set with a plainly written insurance policy that was issued in the 1970s and “[i]n 1984 the Australian government adopted a plain-language policy for its public documents and this has been extended to the language of the law itself” (Cutts 2013: xxiv).

New Zealand – Plain language in New Zealand originated in the mid-1980s when the Public Trust Office set about rewriting their wills in plain English (Asprey n.d.: 32). Harris (2015) asserts that “the ideal of plain language is pervasive across most New Zealand government organisations” and she also notes that plain language is well established in the public sector.

Papua New Guinea – Plain English has also surfaced in Papua New Guinea – a country renowned for its profusion of languages. English is the official language of the courts although it is often only the second or third language of the judges and magistrates who preside over the courts, and presumably of the members of the public who need to deal with the courts, “so plain language is absolutely necessary” (Wearne & Tricker 1997: 29).

2.1.2.2 In North America

Canada – In addition to the USA in North America, as discussed in section 2.1.1 above, Canada has been active in the plain language movement since the 1970s (Asprey n.d.: 7). The Canadian government requires that “plain language and proper grammar...be used in all communication with the public” (Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat 2002: 5). Furthermore, as Canada has two official languages (namely English and French), the “plain language policy...applies equally to each language” (Asprey n.d.: 13).

Mexico – The drive for plain language began in earnest in Mexico in the 2000s when the Mexican government launched their ‘Citizen’s Language’ programme. The premise of the programme was that “citizens cannot exercise their rights or fulfil their obligations, if the messages from government institutions lack clarity” (St John 2005: 39). But according to Galán Vélez and Canizales González (2012: 38), the project “flourished for a few years and then practically vanished”.

2.1.2.3 In Europe

The European Union (EU) – Since 1993, the EU has required European Community legislation to be drafted in the following way: “the wording of the act should be clear, simple, concise and unambiguous; unnecessary abbreviations, ‘Community jargon’ and excessively long sentences should be avoided” (Asprey n.d.: 21). This led to the subsequent launch of the ‘Fight the Fog’ campaign in 1998, which aimed “to encourage clear writing in EU institutions” (Asprey n.d.: 22) and comprised lectures, a guide, a website and recognition awards. Cutts (2013: xxiv–xxv) confirms that the EU promotes plain language across institutions in all 23 of its official European languages.

Sweden – This Scandinavian country has a rich history of plain language as intimated in section 2.1. An L1 expert was employed by the government in 1976 and in 1980 plain Swedish was written into law (Sundin 1999). Subsequently, the ‘Plain Swedish Group’ was set up by the government in 1994 “to promote clear and simple language in official documents and to encourage government agencies all over Sweden to start plain language projects” (Sundin 1999). A plain language approach adopted by governmental authorities and agencies continues to be firmly entrenched in Sweden (Cutts 2013: xxiv–xxv).

France – The French government established a committee of “language experts, civil servants and end users...[whose] role is to simplify official forms and government correspondence” in 2001 (Asprey n.d.: 24). This committee (*Comité d’orientation pour la simplification du language administratif* [Orientation committee for the simplification of administrative language] or COSLA), has published a plain language guide and has revised many of the government’s most frequently used forms (Asprey n.d.).

Germany – Established in 1947, the German Language Society aims to make legislation more understandable and “has checked and edited proposed legislation...[suggesting] clearer alternative language” (Asprey n.d.: 25) since 1966. However, there is no law or obligation compelling government departments to make use of this service (Asprey n.d.: 25).

Italy – Italy’s foray into plain language began in 1994 and the Ministry of Public Administration set out to determine how to “improve and simplify administrative language” (Asprey n.d.: 26) the following year. The Italian government launched its plain language programme *Progetto Chiaro!* (‘Project Clarity!’) in 2002 with the aim of simplifying governmental communications (Asprey n.d.; Williams 2005). But according to Williams (2005: 31), “the momentum favouring language reform came to an abrupt halt...[and the project] was shut down altogether”.

2.1.2.4 In South Asia

India – Although India is a country with many languages, its dominant language – the language of business and the government – is English (Asprey n.d.: 29). Spurred on by a consumer movement similar to those seen in the US and the UK, “the need for plain language in consumer documents and laws” (Asprey n.d.: 29) has been acknowledged. In 2017, the Vidhi Centre for Legal Policy made a plain language manual available in “a calibrated attempt to introduce plain language drafting to India” (Mukherjee, Narayanan, Chandrashekaran, Sengupta, Sharma & Srinivasan 2017: 4).

Singapore – Asprey (n.d.: 30) recounts that plain language first reached Singapore in 1998 when the “Academy of Law held a series of workshops on plain legal language for bankers, conveyancers and insurers”. This was followed by plain English writing courses being added to undergraduate and postgraduate law courses (Lim 2005: 51). More recently, a 2014 PR Week article claims that “[a]s the demand for transparency grows, banks and financial institutions in Singapore abandon the practice of using jargon and twisted English phrases” (Jain 2014).

A discussion on plain English in South Africa follows in section 2.3.

2.2. Defining plain English

The Plain Language Movement has focused on legal texts, mainly in the legal environment, but also as they apply to the banking, insurance, and other consumer-focused industries. Mazur (2000: 205) cites the following plain language definitions:

Martin Cutts, research director of the Plain Language Commission in the United Kingdom... ‘The writing and setting out of essential information in a way that gives a

cooperative, motivated person a good chance of understanding the document at the first reading, and in the same sense that the writer meant it to be understood'.

Berry... 'clear, straightforward expression, using only as many words as are necessary, and which avoids obscurity, inflated vocabulary and convoluted sentence construction'.

Cheek (2010:13) cites this definition of plain language from the Law Reform Commission of Victoria on plain English:

'Plain English' involves the use of plain, straightforward language which ... conveys its meaning as clearly and simply as possible, without unnecessary pretension or embellishment.

Kimble (1996–1997: 2) clarifies that:

[P]lain language is not just about vocabulary. It involves all the techniques for clear communication – planning the document, designing it, organizing it, writing clear sentences, using plain words, and testing the document whenever possible on typical readers.

Felker (cited in Schriver 1989a: 321) decries the use of the term 'plain English' as not sufficient to encompass the discipline and advocates the use of the term 'document design' because:

[U]seful, understandable documents entail more than just easy words and simple sentences. The organization and format of a document may be just as important as its language. The degree to which the document is matched to the capabilities of its users and the setting of its use may affect comprehension as much as clearly written sentences.

This small sample of the many available definitions illustrates how broad a definition can be, but also highlights the common threads woven through them. It also becomes apparent that in the same way that a text can be improved and made plain, there are obviously identifiable features that cause a text not to be plain. Gouws (2010: 81) notes the following examples of such features: "long sentences, the use of archaic words, over-punctuation and the absence of 'white spaces'". Kimble (1994–1995: 52) elucidates the definition of plain language by explaining what plain language is not: "Plain language is not anti-literary, anti-intellectual, unsophisticated, drab, ugly, babyish or base."

In summary, while plain language definitions seem to weigh heavily on the side of the textual content, the layout, design, font and white space all contribute to the plainness of a text – particularly in the way that they coalesce in ‘document design’ (Schriver 1989a: 317).

2.2.1 The elements of plain English

As with the lack of a single definition encompassing an agreed meaning of plain language, what constitutes plain language and how it is arrived at is also not universally fixed. Mazur (2000: 209) states that “many plain language proponents point out that guidelines are not rules: their observances require judgment”. Furthermore, Redish & Rosen (cited in Kimble 1992: 18) contend that guidelines are useful as they provide advice and suggestions that the writer can consider when writing in plain English.

Kimble (1992: 11–14) outlines the elements of plain language under the categories of words, sentences, organisation, design and general. Schiess (2003–2004: 71–74) lists Garner’s ten plain guidelines, fourteen recommendations from Kimble and his own ten plain language principles. The guidelines that they all share include:

- use headings
- prefer the active voice
- avoid long sentences
- use short, simple, familiar words and
- use examples, lists, tables and charts

whereas two of the three, namely Kimble and Schiess, also include:

- cutting unnecessary words
- paying attention to document design, and
- using concrete verbs and not using abstract nouns (Schiess 2003–2004: 71–74).

Petelin (2010: 212–213) advocates starting the process of writing plainly by “creating a profile of your intended and potential readers” and then expounds on a range of guidelines that she recommends under the headings of ‘substance and structure’ and ‘style (verbal and visual)’ as shown in Table 2.1.

Substance and structure
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Appropriate to the purpose of the communication. • Understandable, accessible content. • Sensitive to the context of the communication and to its readers. • Readable chunks that are well organised through the document. • Accurate, precise, relevant, essential, comprehensive, authoritative and current content. • Action-oriented so that the reader is motivated to act on the message. • A coherent, logical structure and appropriate sequence with appropriate transitional words/phrases. • Parallel structure to break up complex material in sentences and in vertical lists where appropriate. • No cross-referencing that sends the reader elsewhere, if possible. • Appropriate use of headings and statements as ‘advance organisers’/‘signposts’.
Style (verbal and visual)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Active voice and crisp, strong verbs – where appropriate. • Avoid convoluted, awkwardly embedded sentences, nominalisations and noun strings. • Unambiguous/clear/coherent (unable to be inadvertently or deliberately misconstrued). • Formal, but not pompously so. • Conversational (if appropriate), but neither colloquial, nor ‘breezy’. • Concise/succinct/economical style – not verbose/inflated nor redundant. • Human in tone and use first and second person, as appropriate. • Positive – where appropriate (negative, if necessary, but generally avoid double negatives). • Simple – but not simplistic. • Neutral (but not abstract) inclusive language (avoid ageism, classism, racism and sexism). • Common terms rather than technical jargon (unless necessary and familiar to all readers). • Familiar terms (avoid archaic and arcane and foreign – where possible). • Consistent terminology (avoid the ‘thesaurus syndrome’). • Absence of acronyms and initialisms, etc. • Compelling, persuasive style. • Visually inviting and consistent layout. • Charts, tables, graphs and other illustrations for complex material, where appropriate. • Polished to mechanical perfection.

Table 2.1 Petelin's plain English guidelines (Petelin 2010: 212–213)

Cutts (2013: 1–271), in his comprehensive guide, categorises twenty-five guidelines under seven main headings as shown in Table 2.2 below.

Style and grammar	1. Write short sentences and clear paragraphs 2. Prefer plain words 3. Write tight (remove dross) 4. Favour active-voice verbs 5. Use vigorous verbs and untie noun strings 6. Use vertical lists 7. Convert negative to positive 8. Reduce cross-references 9. Use good punctuation 10. Pitch your writing at the right level 11. Avoid being enslaved by myths 12. Try to avoid sexist language 13. Use good grammar 14. Start well and end well
Preparing and planning	15. Plan before you write
Organising the information	16. Use a reader-centred structure 17. Consider different ways of setting out your information
Management of writing	18. Manage the writing of others effectively and considerately
Plain English for specific purposes	19. Apply these guidelines to emails 20. Produce lucid and well-organised instructions 21. Don't waffle on the web 22. Apply these guidelines to legal documents 23. Cut out the detail and test your document on low-literacy readers
Layout	24. Use clear layout to present your words in an easily accessible way
Proofreading	25. Check your stuff before the readers do

Table 2.2 Cutts's plain language guidelines (Cutts 2013: 1–271)

Butt (2002: 178–181) offers the following ‘techniques’ to be applied for the simplification of writing:

- Write for the audience
- Organise the material logically
- Pay attention to layout and design
- Wherever possible, test the document on prospective users

- Watch sentence length
- Prefer the active voice to the passive
- Prefer verbs to noun phrases
- Avoid synonym strings
- Avoid archaic words
- Prefer ‘must’ to ‘shall’
- Use normal punctuation

With so many sets of guiding principles available, possibly the most important advice to take cognisance of is that of Kimble (1994–1995: 66) who emphasises that plain language guidelines “are just that – guidelines, not inflexible rules”. Additionally, Redish (1997: 31) underscores the importance of fully appreciating the context when applying these guidelines.

The examples of recommended guidelines illustrated above clearly indicate strong overlap and general consistency of the types of techniques advocated by plain English experts.

2.2.2 Approaches to plain English

In determining whether texts meet the needs of their audiences, Schriver (1989b: 238) identifies three methods of evaluation, namely “(1) text-focused, (2) expert-judgment-focused, and (3) reader-focused approaches”.

2.2.2.1 A text-focused approach

A text-focused approach places the focus on “the document, not the reader per se” (Penman cited in Mazur 2000: 206) and examples include readability formulas, guidelines and checklists (Schriver 1989b: 241).

Readability formulas, for example, the Flesch Reading Ease formula, the Gunning FOG index, and the SMOG Readability formula, analyse factors like the number of syllables in words and the number of words in sentences. Colter (2009: 47) stresses the shortcoming of such formulas: “they only measure what can be counted...[and] ignore important characteristics of a document that make it usable, like audience-appropriate content and logical organisation”. Furthermore, they do not take the meaning of the words and sentences into consideration. Chomsky (2002: 15) famously demonstrated this with the grammatically correct but semantically nonsensical sentence: “Colorless [sic] green ideas sleep furiously”

which would be a plain English sentence based on word and sentence length, but not based on content.

Guidelines refer to the elements of plain English, which were explained in section 2.2.1.

Checklists could make use of the elements of plain English as a reminder of what to consider when drafting a text.

2.2.2.2 An expert-judgement-focused approach

Schrivener (1989b: 244) refers to experts in this case as “individuals who possess high knowledge about the text, its audience, or writing itself” in the form of peers, subject-matter experts, editors or external parties who can offer specialised knowledge or insights.

2.2.2.3 A reader-focused approach

As the name of this approach infers, the focus is on the reader’s experience of the text.

Schrivener (1989b: 247) explains how a reader-focused approach can elicit responses from the reader about how well the text meets their needs:

There are two general classes of reader feedback methods: concurrent tests (which evaluate the real-time problem-solving behaviors [sic] of readers as they are actively engaged in comprehending and using the text for its intended purpose) and retrospective tests (which elicit feedback after the reader has finished with reading and using the text).

2.2.3 In favour of plain language

Cutts (2013: xxv) asserts that texts crafted in plain English can improve the comprehensibility of the text. Kimble (1994–1995: 62–65) attests to this as he cites numerous studies as evidence of the fact that plain language improves comprehension. These studies show an increase in correct answers on questions determining comprehension, a decrease in time needed to comprehend a text, a reduction in errors made, and an increase in the completion rate of forms.

Perceptions of plain language are generally positive. Testing plain language texts and their original counterparts with a focus group, Cutts (2013: xii) found that the readers preferred the plain texts and rated them “significantly clearer than the originals”. A survey of consumers in

the US found that “84 per cent of all consumers...are more likely to trust a company that uses jargon-free, plain English in communications” (Petelin 2010: 209).

A study by Charrow and Charrow (1979: 1309) on the understandability of jury instructions revealed that certain linguistic features do, in fact, interfere with understanding. These include nominalisations, vague prepositional phrases, whiz⁴ and complement deletions, technical vocabulary, misplaced phrases, inadequate use of modal verbs, multiple negatives, passive constructions, word lists, the structure of the discourse, and embeddings.

Strandvik (2015: 146) claims that Sweden has proven the case for plain language as “the legal profession...has learned to express legal complexity in clear writing without jeopardizing legal precision” since implementing a plain language policy more than 40 years ago.

Staying in the legal field, lay people are not the only readers to benefit from plain language. According to Butt (2002: 183), even in the case of legal texts “[l]awyers find plain language easier to read and digest, cutting down time and effort for them almost as much as for their clients.”

Kimble (1992: 25–26) corroborates his viewpoint on the benefits of plain language for business with research that shows results of reduced customer enquiries, saved time and money, and reduced errors. Eagleson (cited in Shriver 1991: 4) concurs that plain language has saved government and business millions of dollars. Mazur (2000: 205) reports that in 1998, when President Clinton issued his memorandum calling for all writing by the federal government to be in plain language, he professed that “[p]lain language saves the Government and the private sector time, effort and money”.

The ease or difficulty the reader experiences when mentally processing information is referred to as fluency (Baker 2011: 12), which Baker (2011: 1) notes is “critical to the understanding of the preference for plain language [and] which until now has been supported only by anecdotal and empirical surveys”. She does, however, concede that companies like General Electric, Federal Express, and the Veterans Benefit Association in the US have seen cost-saving benefits from rewriting their documents in plainer language (Baker 2011: 16).

⁴ “In English, many subordinate clauses are introduced by the words ‘which is,’ ‘who were,’ ‘that are,’ etc. These ‘little words’ help make the structure of the sentence clear to the reader – they make it easier for the reader to understand how the subordinate clause relates to the rest of the sentence. Removing these ‘little words’ is called ‘whiz-deletion.’ ‘Whiz-deletion’ can often make a sentence unclear or ambiguous; it can place a greater than necessary burden on the reader. Wherever possible, replace the missing ‘which is,’ ‘who was,’ etc.” (Felker, Pickering, Charrow, Holland & Redish 1981: 39)

Baker (2011: 13) also explains that readers believe writers to be less intelligent if their texts are not plainly written and she further contends that “plain language is, in fact, the right way to write, as it is ‘fluent’ and thereby inspires feelings of ease, confidence and trust in readers” (2011: 1).

St John (2005: 39) concludes the matter decisively for the proponents claiming that “not one organisation adopting plain language documents had ever reverted to the original style”.

2.2.4 What the critics say

Critics complain that simply implementing the principles of plain language will not necessarily guarantee improved comprehensibility (Crump 2002: 715; Penman 1992: 3; Assy 2011: 14). Crump’s (2002: 717, 721, 723) main argument against plain English is that the accuracy of the text is lost. Penman (1992: 1) proclaims that “evidence in support of the [plain language] movement is inadequate or insufficient”.

Crystal (2010: 374) asserts that “[a] blanket condemnation of legal language is naive, in that it fails to appreciate what such language has to do if it is to function efficiently in the service of the community”. Assy (2011: 3) takes this assertion further by declaring that “plain language cannot make the law significantly intelligible to laypeople”.

Crystal (2010: 377) conveys the argument that “everyday language is itself very prone to ambiguity” suggesting that plain English may not constitute a solution to the problem of legalese – a sentiment that is reflected by Barnes (2010: 702).

James (2009: 35) acknowledges that much criticism of plain language stems from the lack of “an authoritative definition” as the focus of plain language is wrongly attributed to simply the word and sentence level.

Penman (1992: 9) concedes that plain language may sometimes be important, while Crump (2002: 716) suggests that the use of plain English should depend on the type of document. Barnes (2010: 674) cites Kimble’s acknowledgement that there are limits to the effectiveness that plain language can achieve.

According to Redish (1997: 30–32), another critic of plain language, David Sless, alleges that:

- there is no evidence that plain language works;
- plain English applies “a small set of style guidelines without regard to users”; and

- “plain English may be immoral if it produces documents that look good but are hard to use”.

Crow (1988: 89) contends that plain English does not cross cultural and dialectal boundaries, suggesting instead that it is “the common, workaday language of a majority culture.” This is, indeed, a pertinent consideration in South Africa – a multilingual, multicultural country.

2.3 Plain language in South Africa

2.3.1 Legislation

The founding provisions of the South African Constitution (Act 108 of 1996) recognise 11 official languages: Afrikaans, English, isiNdebele, isiXhosa, isiZulu, Sepedi, Sesotho, Setswana, siSwati, Tshivenda and Xitsonga. The state is required to advance the use of these languages and ensure that they enjoy parity. The national and provincial governments are required to communicate in at least two official languages, while municipalities are required to consider the preferences of their constituents.

Figure 2.1 below shows the distribution of the population according to L1 spoken. This figure clearly indicates that English is the L1 of less than 10% of the South African population, although the reality is that it “dominates most public domains” (Brenzinger 2017: 49).

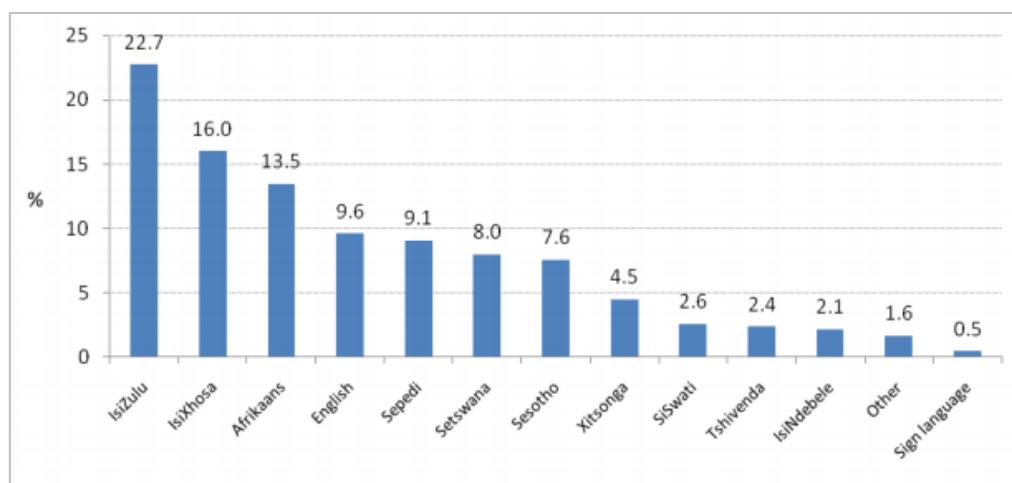


Figure 2.1 Distribution of the population according to L1 (Statistics South Africa 2012: 24)

Furthermore, English remains the dominant language in the country despite the provisions of the Constitution. Kamwangamalu (2000: 50) contends that:

contrary to the constitutional principle of language equity, which stipulates that ‘all official languages must enjoy parity of esteem and must be treated equitably’, language practices in virtually all of the country’s institutions point to a different reality: the languages are unofficially ranked hierarchically and constitute a three-tier, triglossic, system, one in which English is at the top, Afrikaans is in the middle, and the African languages are at the bottom.

The purpose of the legislation that is discussed below is to protect the country’s consumers, as explained by Louw (2010: 132):

One section of the Constitution that has particular relevance to the problem concerning unequal bargaining power and consumer protection can be said to be s 9(1) if [sic] the Bill of Rights. This section reads that ‘everyone is equal before the law and has a right to equal protection and benefit of the law.’

In addition to the general protection afforded by the Constitution, eight pieces of legislation specifically stipulate the use of plain language when communicating with consumers in addressing ‘the problem of unequal bargaining power and consumer protection’. These include the National Credit Act of 2005, the Consumer Protection Act of 2008, the Long-Term Insurance Act 52 of 1998, and the Short-Term Insurance Act 53 of 1998.

Stoop & Chürr (2013: 535) observe that “[u]nlike section 63 of the National Credit Act, the Consumer Protection Act does not require information to be provided in more than one of the official languages”. However, both Acts give prominence to plain language in the sections titled ‘Right to information in plain and understandable language’.

According to the National Credit Act and the Consumer Protection Act, language is considered to be ‘plain’ if an ordinary person is able to understand it without undue effort, which can be interpreted to mean ‘after a single reading’ and without consulting other sources such as dictionaries. The definition of plain language in both the Consumer Protection Act of 2008 section 22 (2) and the National Credit Act of 2005 section 64 (2) are virtually identical; the definition below is from the Consumer Protection Act:

For the purposes of this Act, a notice, document or visual representation is in plain language if it is reasonable to conclude that an ordinary consumer of the class of persons for whom the notice, document or visual representation is intended, with average literacy skills and minimal experience as a consumer of the relevant goods or

services, could be expected to understand the content, significance and import of the notice, document or visual representation without undue effort, having regard to—

- (a) the context, comprehensiveness and consistency of the notice, document or visual representation;
- (b) the organisation, form and style of the notice, document or visual representation;
- (c) the vocabulary, usage and sentence structure of the notice, document or visual representation; and
- (d) the use of any illustrations, examples, headings or other aids to reading and understanding.

Furthermore, section 3(1)(b)(iv) of the Consumer Protection Act specifies the medium of communication, namely, any “advertisement, agreement, mark, instruction, label, warning, notice or other visual representation” to which plain language principles must be applied. These represent not just the legal agreements that are entered into between a supplier and a consumer, but seemingly anything that could influence, assist or impair such an agreement.

Cornelius (2015: 1) attests to the difficulties surrounding the adoption of a suitable and comprehensive definition of plain language and applauds the definition found in the National Credit Act and the Consumer Protection Act as “a sharp and reliable conceptual tool for use by plain language practitioners”.

Gouws (2010: 85) also commends section 22 of the Consumer Protection Act, claiming that it “elevates the plain language requirement to a fundamental consumer right”. Similarly, Stoop and Chürr (2013: 520–521) laud this particular section in the Act, stating that “in a multilingual South African context where consumers are often only functionally literate, [it] is probably the most important pro-active [sic] fairness measure contained in the Act.” The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (2019) defines a person who is functionally literate as one “who can engage in all those activities in which literacy is required for effective function of his or her group and community and also for enabling him or her to continue to use reading, writing and calculation for his or her own and the community’s development”.

However, Cornelius (2015:13) also declares that this definition “ignores the linguistic landscape in South Africa, and provides no guidance on how multilingualism and

multiculturalism should be dealt with in the consumer industry”. In this regard, Stoop & Chürr (2013: 536) question how plain language can be achieved if consumers do not understand the language of communication in the first place.

The Long-Term Insurance Act and the Short-Term Insurance Act cater for plain language under the ‘policyholder protection rules’ sections. Both Acts specify that plain language be used for disclosures, direct marketing and informing policyholders about lodging a complaint.

In addition to these insurance Acts, Treating Customers Fairly (TCF) – a market conduct policy aimed at the financial services industry – also compels organisations to consider the language they use when communicating with the consumer. The Financial Sector Conduct Authority (2018) has made available a TCF self-assessment for organisations to use whereby they can consider their conduct in accordance with certain statements. Those pertaining to plain language include:

- “We assess the clarity, appropriateness and fairness of product information provided to customers, whether produced by us or others.”
- “We test the product information for clarity with the target audience before issuing it.”
- “We regularly review standardised product information we use (whether produced by us or not) to ensure that it remains accurate, clear and appropriate to the applicable customer groups.”

With regard to South Africa’s political will to pass legislation on plain language, Jensen (2010: 821) comments that the “efforts at implementing plain English in the law are commendable. However, they generally do not address the needs of people who are in need of access to justice.”

2.3.2 The South African linguistic reality

The census data presented in Figure 2.1 above shows that the vast majority of South Africans have a Bantu language as mother tongue, while the Germanic-based Afrikaans and English languages account for less than 25% of the population. Although English is the L1 of only about 10% of the population, it is considered to be the country’s lingua franca.

Pienaar (2002: 146) contends that the fact that English is the lingua franca despite being the L1 of such a small percentage of the population, “carries with it concerns relating to successful communication” explaining that “cross-cultural inference, specific discourse

strategies and post-colonial discourse style seem to play an important role in this complex multilingual and multicultural society”.

Language proficiency and literacy skills, particularly in English as it is mostly used by L2 speakers, are low among South Africans (Posel & Zeller 2010: 5; Pienaar 2002: 146). This raises the question regarding the comprehensibility of English-language plain-language texts for the L2 speakers. However, it should also be noted that their L1 reading skills are also considered to be generally poor, as explained below.

The 2016 Progress in International Reading Literacy Study placed South Africa last out of the 50 participating countries for literacy across all 11 official languages where almost 8 out of 10 9-year-old readers failed to achieve a rudimentary level of reading in their L1 (Howie, Combrinck, Roux, Tshele, Mokoena & McLeod Palane 2017: 169).

With regard to the adult population of South Africa, Stoop and Chürr (2013: 533) claim that 11 per cent is illiterate and that the balance is “at least functionally literate”. They go on to posit, however, that this level of functional literacy “does not equip South African consumers to understand business and legal documents” (Stoop & Chürr 2013: 533).

Table 2.3 below indicates that, according to the 2011 census, 59% of the population did not complete the secondary level of education; 43% of this portion of the population has no secondary education at all.

Level of education	Black African	Coloured	Indian or Asian	White	Other	South Africa
No schooling	2 484 492	119 015	26 214	20 752	15 402	2 665 874
Some Primary	3 280 014	387 603	60 152	45 111	17 253	3 790 134
Completed Primary	1 148 911	207 303	25 449	23 489	8 743	1 413 895
Some Secondary	8 334 131	1 172 626	234 124	679 402	61 294	10 481 577
Grade 12/Std 10	6 343 830	706 282	364 305	1 339 835	59 863	8 814 113
Higher	2 019 228	214 927	199 975	1 280 846	35 136	3 750 112
Other	57 685	7 861	7 028	37 146	3 866	113 586
Total	23 668 291	2 815 616	917 248	3 426 580	201 555	31 029 291

Table 2.3 Population over 20 years of age according to highest level of education completed and population group (Statistics South Africa 2012: 48)

Black Africans and coloureds fared the worst out of the population groups with 64% and 67%, respectively, in terms of not having a completed secondary education. In fact, 10% of black Africans have no schooling at all – the lowest of all the groups.

According to Jensen (2010: 820–821), the causes for the difficulties experienced by such linguistic minorities in effectively using L2 English for communication are due to the gap that

exists between their own L2 variety of English and so-called standardised South African English. The implementation of plain English in South Africa appears to aspire to close this gap. The question is: Does it?

Cutts (2013: 234–235) considers issues pertaining to low literacy, L2 English speakers and those lacking formal education in relation to plain language. He recommends that plain language use be adjusted according to the needs of the particular group. In the South African environment, all three of the issues mentioned by Cutts overlap significantly, as indicated above, suggesting that the plain language needs of the audience will undoubtedly be compounded.

2.4 Plain English and non-native speakers

Not understanding the lingua franca well can have dire consequences. For example, in 1977, 583 people were killed when two aeroplanes collided in Tenerife. Confusion over the term ‘take-off’ was blamed for the incident (Cutts 2013: ix). In 1989, an aeroplane crashed into a mountain when the pilot did not understand the meaning of the phrase ‘pull up’ (Thrush 2001: 289).

With regard to the effect of different L1s influencing the comprehensibility of plain English, Thrush (2001: 291) explains that “few studies have actually examined the specific elements of English that interfere with comprehension by non-native speakers”. Plain English has mainly been tested in English with native English speakers (Lee 2014: 12; Schriver & Gordon 2010: 64).

Thrush (2001: 290) suspects that linguistic differences in a reader’s mother tongue could influence the readability of plain English. Based on the two aviation examples cited earlier, we can presumably also extend this suspicion to the understandability of spoken plain English.

Lee (2014: 27) gives the example of non-native English speakers needing repetition of similar information because it strengthens uncertain information; this is contradictory to definitions of plain English, which call for essential information, using only as many words as are necessary (Cutts 2013: 53). Lee (2014: 15) also claims that phrasal verbs are influenced by a

non-native speaker's mother tongue. Hammel (2008: 284) illustrates this point with a German example:

Translate a word such as *beschleunigen* as 'expedite,' and many readers whose first language is a Romance language will understand it. Translate it as 'speed up,' and you risk confusion.

In a brief released by the US Department of Health and Human Sciences (n.d.) on using plain language to achieve clear communication with the public, the following statement is made with regard to L2 speakers of English: "Plain English won't necessarily help individuals who do not speak English as their primary language and who have limited ability to read, write, speak, or understand English."

The document further explains that the best way to communicate effectively to L2 English speakers with limited English proficiency is in their mother tongue while being cognisant of cultural appropriateness. These notions are apposite to the South African linguistic reality.

This is endorsed by Pienaar (2002: 150) who warns of the complexity that exists in the South African context as "[c]ommunication rules (or discourse strategies) differ among the various speech communities ... [and the] levels of proficiency in English varies dramatically".

2.5 Summary

Plain language has existed in various forms and guises for more than two thousand years. Although no consensus exists on the definition of plain language or how best to achieve plain language, it spans the globe in its role as an effective means for improving communication. It is commonplace in many countries and can be considered beneficial to citizens by virtue of the fact that many governments legislate its use. The enduring history and prevalence of plain language and, indeed, its usefulness cannot be denied.

South Africa is one of the countries that has embraced plain language by incorporating it into various pieces of legislation in an effort to protect the consumer. South Africa, however, suffers from poor literacy and low education levels, and the majority of the population speaks a language other than the lingua franca, English.

Plain language for an L1 speaker of English may differ significantly from plain language for an L2 speaker of English (Crow 1988; Cutts 2013; US Department of Health and Human

Sciences n.d.) However, insufficient information exists on the effectiveness of plain English for speakers of other languages or the influence of one's L1 in this regard (Lee 2014; Schriver & Gordon 2010; Thrush 2001). Furthermore, the role of multilingualism and multiculturalism in relation to plain language warrants investigation (Cornelius 2015; Pienaar 2002) – an unequivocally fundamental consideration in the South African context.

This study investigates the comprehensibility of a plain English text for non-L1 speakers of English. In the next chapter, I will provide information on the methodology used to do so.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

My interest in plain English developed in the corporate environment more than 20 years ago when my role included responsibility for improving written communication in a corporate bank. I noticed that the business writing materials we used and the guidelines for written communication we were encouraged to apply were essentially Eurocentric. My curiosity was piqued about the usability of plain English in the unique South African context with its combination of constitutionally protected multilingualism, English as lingua franca despite widespread low levels of English proficiency, cultural diversity and low levels of literacy.

With the introduction of the plain language requirements in section 22(2) of the Consumer Protection Act of 2008 and in section 64 (2) of the National Credit Act of 2005, the question of the applicability of plain language in South Africa became even more relevant. This is particularly so for texts developed by organisations (such as insurance companies, banks, cellphone providers, or pharmaceutical companies) for vastly diverse groups – 90% of whom speak one of the ten official languages other than English (see Figure 2.1) and 59% of whom have at most *some* secondary education (see Table 2.3).

Burt (2009: 43) questions the feasibility of plain language improving text comprehension in South Africa due to a lack of research on the country's multilingual and multicultural society of which the majority are deemed merely functionally literate. Furthermore, she raises the matter of plain English *not* being plain Afrikaans, plain isiNdebele, plain Sepedi, plain Sesotho, plain Siswati, plain Xitsonga, plain Setswana, plain Tshivenda, plain isiXhosa or plain isiZulu. English is, at most, the L2 of the majority of the country's citizens.

This relates to the question that this research aims to investigate, namely whether L1 speakers of Afrikaans and isiXhosa comprehend an English-language plain language text as well as their English L1 counterparts do.

3.2 Participants in the research project

I wanted to test an authentic plain language text, one that already exists and is available in the public domain, on 'real' people; the type of people who could be expected to read such a text

as the need arises on their journey through life. These would typically be people who have no prior knowledge of the subject at hand, as catered for by the above-mentioned Acts.

I decided to use as participants students who would soon be completing their studies and entering the job market and who would thus be becoming financially independent. Typically, the students will soon need to consider insurance options – if one assumes firstly, they will take up such an option and, secondly, that their families may expect them to pay their own insurance premiums once they start earning – and will therefore need to be able to read texts composed by insurance companies.

In order to gain access to students as participants for this study, I approached a Western Cape college of further education and training. This college offers vocational training in:

- engineering
- business
- hospitality
- information technology
- safety
- education studies
- 2D animation, and
- tourism.

The students at the college have not necessarily completed secondary education and they are mainly isiXhosa, English and Afrikaans L1 speakers. The college's language of instruction is English only and, in some cases, students are learning in English for the first time.

The college has five campuses in the south of Cape Town and I was permitted to access four of the campuses – Muizenburg, Khayalitsha, Fish Hoek and Westlake. The vocational focus of each campus differs, so this gave me access to students with a variety of skills at varying levels.

The college suggested that I would have a better response rate if I collected data during class instead of outside of class hours as attendance of classes on the schedule is monitored and therefore expected to be high. I was given access to existing classes, where lessons were not negatively impacted, over a three-month period. My objective was to test a minimum of 100 participants from English, Afrikaans and isiXhosa language groups collectively using a cloze test. I conducted the test in seven separate sessions with a total of 138 students: 31 English, 28

Afrikaans and 79 isiXhosa L1 speakers. Although these numbers reflect the composition of the student body at the college, the larger number of isiXhosa L1 speakers could be seen as a built-in bias in the sample, as discussed later in section 5.4.

The students ranged in age from 18 to 31 and the highest school grade that they had completed successfully ranged from Grade 8 to Grade 12.

Figure 3.1 below indicates the split of participants according to their language of learning and teaching (LOLT) at school.

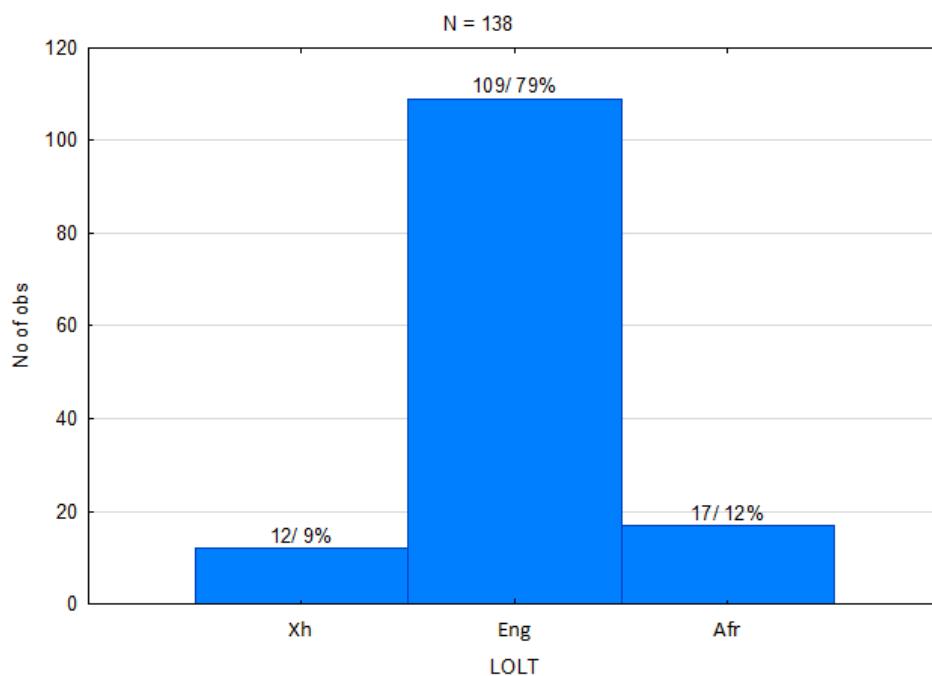


Figure 3.1 Number of participants according to LOLT

I conducted a live pilot test with a small group of students to try out the then-final version of the text and the accompanying documents (comprising the consent form and the language background questionnaire). The live pilot (as opposed to the dry pilots; see section 3.5) confirmed the usability of the documents and allowed me to prepare more thoroughly for the testing situations; this is discussed in section 3.10.3.

3.3 The text used in the study

3.3.1 A text on the topic of funeral insurance

I selected a text that could be expected to be used by a large proportion of the population. The topic of the text is funeral insurance. Funeral insurance is one of the most highly used financial products in South Africa: 50% of the adult population has “some form of risk cover, of which funeral cover accounts for the largest proportion (89.2%)” (Finmark South Africa 2016: 5).

Bester, Chamberlain, Short and Walker (2005: 1) explain that:

The provision of funeral cover is...one of the most widely used financial services in South Africa and one of the most neglected...Funeral cover in South Africa is a product targeted at lower-income households, a segment of the population characterised by low levels of financial literacy and thus vulnerable to abuse.

In the study on funeral insurance conducted by Bester et al. (2005: 6), the authors note that “[w]hen asked about their spending priorities, participants often cited funerals, burial societies and death before spending on education or day to day expenses like food, water and basic services”. Participants in the study indicated that there is a “high value placed on...being able to bury loved ones with dignity” (Bester et al. 2005: 6). Furthermore, Bester et al. (2005: 3) explain that “the indigenous African population is by far the largest consumers of financial and other services related to funerals”.

This particular text was taken from the website of the product provider that sells the most funeral products in the country (Swiss Re 2017: 7). Consequently, the participants could very well encounter such a text as they become financially independent in the future, while they are unlikely to be familiar with the subject matter at this stage. Despite identifying what I suspect is an error in the text (of a repeated bullet point), I chose not to discard the text but to continue with its use as it reflects the reality of what audiences are often faced with.

The text (see Appendix A) was sourced from the internet and consists of 746 words across 12 headings and 40 sentences.

3.3.2 A text that can be considered ‘plain’

While plain language has an international following, a wealth of research supporting it and a foothold in South Africa’s legislation, there are no clear, globally agreed-upon rules dictating what constitutes a plain language text. James (2007: 2) corroborates this predicament faced by the industry:

while there is plenty of case-specific evidence, there was as yet no set of international standards backed by an institutional authority. There is no ISO^[5] reference point for plain language; no professional body setting industry benchmarks; no accreditation system for practitioners.

Practitioners often tend to revert to readability formulas (see section 2.2.2.1) like the Flesch-Kincaid Readability Test or the SMOG⁶ test for want of a better tool, despite their well-documented failings (Bruce, Rubin & Starr 1981; Cutts 2013; Meade & Smith 1991; Redish 1981; Schriver 1989b: 200).

Although there is no clear means for measurement of plain English or the effectiveness of plain English, there are generally agreed-upon guidelines that indicate the features of a plain text. The guidelines are not discrete but apply in varying degrees according to the writing itself, the perceptions about the writing and the actual outcomes of the writing (James 2007: 2). James (2007: 4) expands these three broad standards into six focus areas:

- Audience
- Content and purpose
- Structure
- Language and style
- Design
- Outcomes

The text used in the study has been assessed according these six focus areas and the features discussed in section 2.2.1. It is reasonable to consider this text to be plain as it includes many of these features, for example, headings, vertical lists, the active voice, and familiar words. Furthermore, the company responsible for the text is compelled to operate in accordance with

⁵‘ISO’ refers to International Organization for Standardization.

⁶‘SMOG’ is the acronym for “simple measure of gobbledegook”. The SMOG test is a widely used measure of text readability. It estimates the years of education that one needs to understand a particular text.

the insurance Acts and TCF policy described in section 2.3.1. Consequently, it is reasonable to assume that the plain language requirements they specify have been adhered to in compiling the text.

3.4 Plain English analysis of the funeral cover text

3.4.1 The writer's intent, knowledge of the audience and user testing

As has been explained in section 2.2.1, what constitutes plain language and how it is arrived at is not universally fixed. The proponents of plain language tend to offer guidelines on how to compose a plain text rather than inflexible rules (Kimble 1994–1995: 66). Consequently, there is no generally accepted ‘checklist’ to consider in the analysis of a plain text.

This lack of a checklist is understandable because of the very nature of plain language: it is based on the intent of the writer to clearly convey certain information in a way that can be understood by the intended audience using techniques that make this possible. This explanation makes it clear that the starting point is the intent of the writer to *clearly* convey information. It also implies that knowing the intended audience is essential. The techniques referred to are discussed in section 2.2.1.

For the purpose of analysing the selected text, I will assume that the intention of the writer was to clearly convey the information on funeral cover. This is a reasonable assumption as the organisation who authored the text presumably wants to sell its product to informed consumers and, furthermore, because legislation and TCF (see section 2.3.1) compel it to do so.

I will also assume that the intended audience was considered when composing the text. The organisation will have had a clear view of its target audience when creating the product and, additionally, will have accumulated data on those who have already taken up their product, which will further contribute to their knowledge of their audience.

Based on the background information on funeral insurance in South Africa provided in section 3.3.1, it would be reasonable to assume that the target audience would comprise:

- people with low financial literacy levels (Bester et al. 2005: 1);

- a majority of indigenous African people (Bester et al. 2005: 3) who we can infer are likely to speak an indigenous African language as an L1; and
- people who have low general literacy levels (see Table 2.3).

Although Stoop (2011: 337) points out that the “definitions of plain language in both the National Credit Act and the Consumer Protection Act begin with the reader” it cannot be assumed that organisations will test their texts on members of their intended audience. In fact, due to the costs involved in such exercises, it is unlikely that widespread testing of this nature takes place in any industry. Cutts (2013: xi), Kimble (1996–1997: 2), Butt (2002: 178–181) and Schiess (2003–2004: 72) all proclaim the importance of user testing. Furthermore, TCF (see section 2.3.1) requires insurance providers to test their information on the target audience. However, in my opinion, it is unlikely that the text was tested on potential users before being made public. My reasons for this assumption include:

- User testing is a costly exercise that few organisations make use of, especially when text for the internet may be updated fairly frequently.
- The results of the cloze test in this study suggest that revisions would have been made to improve the comprehension level further, had user testing taken place.

3.4.2 Method for analysis

It should be noted that ‘plain English’ is not simply a binary concept. While a text may be easily identifiable as ‘not plain’, identifying whether a text *is* ‘plain’ is more complicated. Some techniques may be applied more strictly in some cases than in others. Some techniques may not be applied at all. This may also be the reason that there is not a generally accepted checklist. A checklist would allow a plain language practitioner to simply tick off that, for example, vertical lists had been used or that headings had been incorporated, but this is unlikely to truly reflect the plainness, and ultimately the effectiveness, of a text.

While it may be a straightforward task to determine whether or not headings have been used, considering the effectiveness of the headings or how the headings are used to split relevant information may be more useful than a yes/no indicator. Because, as Schiess (2003–2004: 45) notes, “how far writers take plain-English principles depends on the document and the audience”.

Establishing a method for the evaluation of a plain language text is not the purpose of this study (although it would certainly be useful to writers and evaluators of plain texts). I am

taking a subjective approach in evaluating the extent to which the techniques have been applied and whether, in my opinion, this is sufficient to create a plain English text for the intended audience as I have estimated it to be.

3.4.3 Analysis of selected techniques

The techniques (or as their authors typically call them – guidelines) that form the basis of this analysis are those proposed by Plain English proponents Butt (2002), Cutts (2013), Garner (cited in Schiess 2003–2004: 72), Kimble (1992) and Schiess (2003–2004) (see section 2.2.1); and more specifically, are those on which all or some of these five proponents concur. The analysis excludes any technique that cannot be observed from the text itself, for example, testing the text on the audience, and those that do not have more than one proponent in agreement.

3.4.3.1 Use simple, familiar words (Butt, Cutts, Garner, Kimble, Schiess)

The first guideline suggested by most plain English experts is to use words that are simple and familiar to the reader, which infers avoiding jargon, formal and technical terms, foreign words, and archaic words. Shorter words are usually recommended in preference to longer words, but this may not always be necessary for improved comprehension. For example, ‘received’ is a longer word than ‘got’ but it is likely to be just as well-known due to its frequency of use. The most important aspect of this technique is to ‘[u]se words your readers are likely to understand’ (Cutts 2013: 11).

The text (see Appendix A) does not demonstrate this technique in a number of ways. For example:

- The more formal word ‘*vehicle*⁷’ is preferred to the more familiar word ‘car’.
- The technical term ‘*rider*⁸’ is used and a definition is not provided.
- The terms ‘*funeral cover*’, ‘*funeral plan*’ and ‘*funeral insurance*’ are used synonymously, but the uninformed reader may assume that the different terms have different meanings.

⁷ The use of italics with inverted commas indicates that the quote in question is taken from the text used in the cloze test.

⁸ An underlined word in italics inside inverted commas indicates that this word was deleted from the text by the author, as part of the cloze test.

- The softer idiom ‘pass away’ is used instead of the more direct ‘die’. A reader who is unfamiliar with the idiom may not be able to deduce the meaning from the phrase itself.
- The phrase ‘claim is valid’ may not contain much meaning for an audience with a low level of literacy and financial literacy.
- The longer, more formal ‘additional’ is used in preference to the simpler ‘more’.
- Contractions like ‘you'll’, ‘we've’ and ‘we'll’ are used throughout, which may be problematic for readers with low literacy levels (Cutts 2013: 144).

The text does, however, demonstrate use of the technique by, for example:

- Using the simpler ‘*documents*’ instead of the often opted-for ‘documentation’.
- Using pronouns, thereby making the reader ‘you’ and reinforcing that ‘*we*’ are the organisation conveying the message.
- Being simple and direct in certain instances, e.g. ‘*We pay out fast*’ and ‘*Get 20% cash back*’.
- The more common word ‘payment’ occurring ten times in the text in preference to the more jargon-like ‘*premium*’, although ‘*premium*’ does occur twice.

Jargon and technical terms have been kept to a minimum and there are no archaic or foreign words in the text. While some simple words have been used instead of more complicated synonyms, there were potentially numerous opportunities for improvement from this perspective in order to create a plain, and therefore, more effective text.

3.4.3.2 Be cognisant of optimal sentence length (Butt, Cutts, Garner, Kimble, Schiess)

Sentence length is a technique that all plain English proponents seem to agree on. However, it is less clear what the optimal sentence length is. Cutts (2013: 1) suggests “making the average sentence length 15–20 words”, while Butt (2002: 179) recommends “something in the range of 20 to 25 words per sentence”. These ranges are intended to be achieved over the whole of the text.

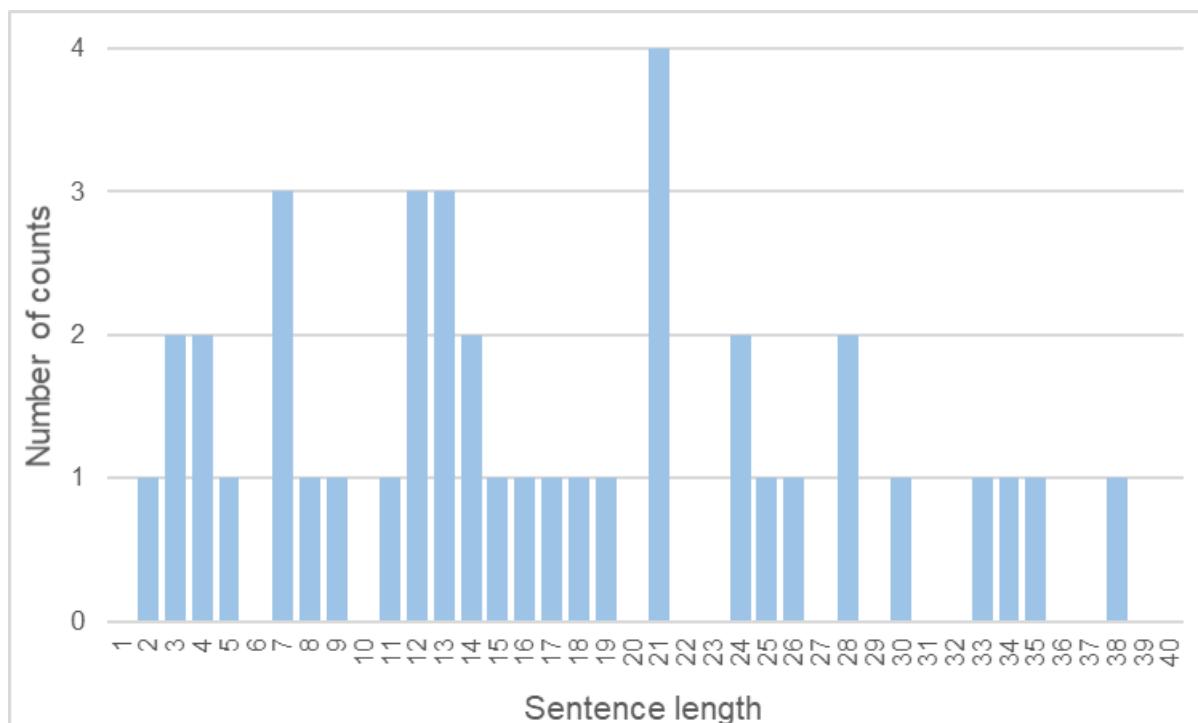


Figure 3.2 Sentence length according to number of words and number of occurrences in the text

The text consists of 746 words across 12 headings and 40 sentences. The average sentence length across the whole of the selected text (excluding headings) is 17 words and the sentence length varies from two words, for example: *Permanent residents*, to 38 words (see example below). Figure 3.2 above shows the number of words per sentence according to how many times a sentence of that length appears in the text. The figure also indicates that 35 of the 40 sentences (viz. 60%) contain 20 words or less.

The key reason for keeping sentences short is that longer sentences may become more convoluted as the number of subordinate clauses they contain increases. Such sentences are more difficult to process, with some subordinate clauses presenting more difficulty than others (Warren 2013).

As an example, this 38-word sentence appears in the opening paragraph of the text.

'Cushion yourself against financial pressure with funeral insurance from [X] that protects you and your loved ones with a lump sum paid within 48 hours - provided we've received all the required documents and your claim is valid.'

It contains the following sentence structure:

1. A main clause: *Cushion yourself against financial pressure with funeral insurance from X*

2. Followed by a defining relative clause: *that protects you and your loved ones with a lump sum paid within 48 hours*
3. Followed by conditional clause: *provided we've received all the required documents and your claim is valid.*

The ratio of short to long sentences is favourable and the average sentence length is within the recommended length. The longer sentences containing subordinate clauses, however, will have put a heavier processing burden on the reader than is ideal – especially considering the low literacy, education and English proficiency levels of the audience.

3.4.3.3 Cut unnecessary words (Schieß, Kimble, Cutts)

Deleting unnecessary words helps to reduce sentence length, which may lead to less complicated sentences and possibly improved comprehension of meaning. Furthermore, “[r]emoving dross enables your information to shine more clearly” (Cutts 2013: 53). It is, obviously, not possible to establish what words have been cut from the text but what can be considered is those that have been retained that could have been cut and those that have been cut that should have been retained.

The following are examples of words that should have been cut:

- The use of the word ‘*actually*’ in the sentence ‘*This is funeral insurance you can actually afford*’ is superfluous as there has been no argument raised to suggest that funeral insurance is unaffordable. Despite the title (*Funeral Cover You Can Afford*) and this sentence, there is no information justifying this claim, making the word ‘*actually*’ unnecessary.
- The word ‘up’ in the prepositional phrase ‘*from R10 000 up to R75 000*’ is unnecessary as the words ‘*from*’ and ‘*to*’ indicate a range.
- ‘*Please note that*’ and ‘*Note that*’ are unnecessary, even more so in an online context such as this, when visual devices could easily have been used to draw attention to the point.
- Using ‘*in order to*’, instead of its simpler alternative ‘*to*’, serves no purpose.

In the first paragraph of the text, the author omits the word ‘*that*’ from ‘*provided [that] we've received all the required documents*’. Warren (2013: 163) would argue for the word ‘*that*’ to be included in such a clause as studies have proven “the usefulness of the explicit marking of

syntax”, although Cutts (2013: 30) would prefer ‘provided that’ to be replaced with the simpler ‘if’.

3.4.3.4 Use verbs and avoid noun strings and nominalisations (Butt, Schiess, Kimble, Cutts)

Plain English proponents recommend that verbs should be used to express actions. Butt (2002: 180) explains that “[v]erbs, especially strong verbs, communicate much more directly than noun phrases”. Furthermore, noun strings are to be avoided. The US website plainlanguage.gov (n.d.) explains that when nouns are grouped together, all but the last one act as adjectives. This can result in confusion for the reader who expects the nouns to act as nouns.

The text makes use of both noun phrases and noun strings. For example, ‘*For a small extra monthly payment*’ could be made more active by modifying the nominalised ‘*payment*’ to create the active verb ‘*pay*’ to achieve: ‘Pay a small amount more’.

Noun strings appear throughout the text, for example, ‘*funeral plan insurance quote*’ and ‘*external provider benefit fee*’.

3.4.3.5 Prefer the active voice to the passive voice (Butt, Cutts, Garner, Kimble, Schiess)

The active voice is preferred to the passive voice as, according to Butt (2002: 179), the “passive is less effective; it may even obscure the message”. Cutts (2013: 63), however, concedes that the passive voice may be used if there is a good enough reason to do so, for example, to defuse hostility or to “focus attention on the receiver of the action”.

Warren (2013: 158–160) explains that while some research over the years has shown that certain complex sentence structures place greater demands on sentence processing, more recent research has shown this not to be the case. He does, however, point out that the fact that “readers...have far greater exposure over their lifetimes to active than passive sentences” (2013: 160) should not be disregarded.

The text demonstrates good use of the active voice with ‘*Add life cover*’, ‘*Get 20% cash back!*’ and ‘*We pay out fast*’. The passive voice is used intentionally to divert the focus from the insurer not returning a payment by taking the subject out of the clause in the following example ‘*no payments are paid back on the death of any other insured life*’.

3.4.3.6 Punctuate correctly (Butt, Schiess, Cutts)

According to Warren (2013: 164), punctuation is used as a marker for syntactic structure and aids the reader to process the text. Plain English advocates further champion the use of accurate punctuation because, as Cutts (2013: 97) explains:

Punctuation shows how words and strings of words are related, separated and emphasized, so its main purpose is to help the reader understand the construction of the sentence—and thus the meaning.

Punctuation is used throughout the text, although not always accurately. Dashes have been used in cases where a full stop would have been more useful by making shorter sentences. For example, ‘*Anyone can apply for a quote - we accept all South African citizens or legal permanent residents in South Africa between 18 and 75 years old*’. A comma should have been inserted before ‘*which*’ to indicate that the clause it introduces is non-defining in the following sentence:

‘A funeral insurance quote drawn up specially for you and your needs - from R10,000 up to R75,000 of cover an immediate accidental death benefit which covers you as soon as we receive your first premium.’

However, I suspect that this sentence contains an error that has been overlooked by the author. Namely, that the wording from ‘an’ to the end of the sentence should have been deleted as it appears, almost verbatim, in the bullet point that follows (‘*An immediate accidental death benefit, covering you as soon as we receive your first payment.*’).

3.4.3.7 Consider document design (Kimble, Schiess, Butt, Cutts)

Document design concerns the presentation of the content and should not be underestimated as an element of plain language. Kimble (1992: 12) recommends the following specific guidelines:

- Use 8pt–10pt, readable type
- Use 50–70 characters a line
- Use ample white space
- Use highlighting techniques – bold, underlining, bullets
- Avoid all capitals
- Use diagrams, tables, charts to help explain as needed

Because a screen shot was taken of the text (in order to preserve the exact layout), it is difficult to determine the exact font size used for the text, but the font does appear to be easily readable. The recommended character count per line is exceeded across the text except for in the bullet points of the ‘*Key Benefits*’ section. Ample white space surrounds the headings and separates sections. Highlighting techniques have been used, in particular, colour, bold and bullets. All capitals have been avoided. No diagrams, charts or tables have been used, although this style of visual representation may have aided the reader’s comprehension. For example, all the benefits could have been tabulated under headings including who is covered, the cost and the benefit amount.

Schrivener (1997: 506–517) proposes a range of guidelines specifically for online use. The text complies with the following:

- A sans serif font, as recommended for online text, has been used.
- Italics and underlining have been avoided.
- All headings and sub-headings have been left aligned.
- The font makes use of proportional letter spacing, which is based on the width of each letter.

Furthermore, the text is left aligned, which allows for equal spacing between words. Schrivener (1997: 270) explains that the ‘rivers of white space’ produced by the unequal spacing between words in justified text has been found to cause less accurate comprehension.

3.4.3.8 Organise logically (Kimble, Butt, Cutts)

To achieve logically organised content, the text needs to be organised from the reader’s perspective as opposed to that of the writer. This means that readers should be able to navigate the text easily, find the information they are looking for, and understand it (Cutts 2013: 165).

The progression of the text appears to be logical according to the following structure:

- the opening paragraph positions the topic of funeral cover,
- the main benefits of the cover are emphasised,
- the qualifying criteria are highlighted,
- the general features of the cover are listed,
- additional features are listed, and
- extra benefits are described.

The role played by the opening paragraph, however, is one of a ‘sales pitch’ more than a positioning statement – demonstrating the writer’s need to convince rather than acknowledging the reader’s need to be informed. While this is to be expected (given that the aim of the text is to sell a product), the writer still has an obligation to give the consumer clear information, as part of Treating Customers Fairly. Related ideas are grouped together, but as is shown in section 3.4.3.9, this is not consistently achieved. For example, the section ‘*A Funeral Policy to Protect Your Entire Family*’ correctly groups information about the family in the first three bullets, but ends with an unrelated bullet on the refund of payments.

3.4.3.9 Use headings (Kimble, Garner, Schiess, Cutts)

The text uses four main headings and four subheadings to separate and organise the content. The main heading of the text is ‘*Funeral Cover You Can Afford*’, which should guide the reader very clearly on what to expect from the text that follows. However, the text gives no indication of the cost of the funeral cover and there is only one other reference to affordability in the form of a declaration, and no evidence of affordability is provided.

The information that follows the heading ‘*Key Benefits*’ does not appear to match the intent of the heading. For example, one key benefit is that the reader can get ‘*Additional funeral benefits*’ – a statement that could confuse a reader with a low level of literacy in the sense that the text is saying that a key benefit of the funeral cover is more funeral benefits.

The descriptive heading ‘*Extra Benefits You Can Add to Your Funeral Insurance Policy*’ breaks up the text into the smaller sections that then follow under sub-headings. The heading is clear, direct, active, and uses the pronoun ‘you’. The only shortcoming is the use of ‘*Funeral Insurance Policy*’ where ‘funeral policy’ would be sufficient, as used elsewhere in the text.

Similarly, the heading ‘*What Does Your Funeral Plan Give You?*’ is a descriptive and useful organisational marker for the reader. Unfortunately, the text that follows does not always answer the question posed, or the question and answer do not match, as shown below:

- ‘*To make sure your cover keeps up with the rising cost of funerals, we’ll increase your funeral cover and payments by 7% every year.*’

The above bullet point should be rephrased to answer the question ‘*What Does Your Funeral Plan Give You?*’ For example:

Cover that keeps up with the rising cost of funerals because we'll increase your funeral cover and payments by 7% every year.

'Anyone can apply for a quote - we accept all South African citizens or legal permanent residents in South Africa between 18 and 75 years old (certain Ts & Cs apply).'

This point does not answer the question '*What Does Your Funeral Plan Give You?*' because by using the word 'your' it presupposes that the reader has the cover, which doesn't follow when the point addresses how to apply for cover.

- *'You won't need a medical exam in order to get a funeral plan insurance quote from us.'*

The above bullet point does not answer the question '*What Does Your Funeral Plan Give You?*' but makes an unrelated statement.

- *'We pay out fast: all valid funeral policy claims are paid out within 48 hours of receiving all the required documents.'*

This should be rephrased to answer the question '*What Does Your Funeral Plan Give You?*'

For example:

A fast payout. All valid funeral policy claims are paid out within 48 hours of receiving all the required documents.

The heading '*A Funeral Policy to Protect Your Entire Family*' guides the reader to expect new information about how the entire family could be protected. The first three bullet points that follow meet this expectation but the final one changes direction with the opening statement: '*Get your payments back!*'.

The subheadings simply name the products that the subsequent text goes on to describe. They could have been used more effectively by describing the information that followed – providing support to effectively conveying the information. For example, '*Monthly Provider*' could have been more effectively worded as 'The Monthly Provider pays a monthly amount if the insured person dies'.

3.4.3.10 Use vertical lists when appropriate (Cutts, Kimble, Garner)

Vertical lists are used to break up content into more manageable chunks especially when more than two conditions, points or ideas need to be conveyed or when the text is becoming too complicated. Cutts (2013: 83) explains that readers benefit from the uniformity of a parallel structure in a vertical list.

Four vertical lists appear in the text. Of the four, only one of the lists comprises all items in a parallel structure. An example of this can be seen in section 3.4.3.9 in the discussion of the heading '*What Does Your Funeral Plan Give You?*'.

3.4.4 Conclusion of the plain English analysis

As was discussed in section 3.4.2, assessing the plainness of a text is not a simple matter of ticking a box to confirm that a technique has been applied. Applying a technique, as and when deemed necessary, is in fact more a matter of degree. The degree to which a technique is applied should be based on the needs of the audience.

While the selected text can indeed be deemed to be plain, the question of whether the text is 'plain enough' will be borne out by the results of the research undertaken.

3.5 Cloze test as the instrument for testing

There is no one instrument with which one can necessarily ascertain whether or not a specific text is written in plain language; the cloze test was identified as a reasonable option. Stubbs and Tucker (1974: 241) espouse the use of a cloze test as "a powerful and economical measure of English language proficiency for non-native speakers of English".

Keshavarz and Salimi (2007: 82) describe the early development of the cloze test as a means of measuring the readability of texts ... initially used to assess first language (L1) reading comprehension. By the early 1970s, the cloze procedure was being used in second language (L2) situations, both as a reading activity and as a test.

Chapelle and Abraham (1990: 121) explain that "[t]he cloze procedure is used to construct a language test by deleting from a passage some information which the test-taker must fill in". Cloze tests are highly contextualised as they are typically applied to long passages and the

reader of the text perceives the whole (Keshavarz & Salimi 2007: 82; Stansfield & Hansen 1983: 30).

I conducted several dry pilot tests (using friends and family members as participants) on various versions of a text to ascertain the usability of the text, the optimal length of the text considering the time available⁹ and the optimal deletion frequency,¹⁰ and the time required to complete the test. After considering the results of the dry pilots, I deleted every seventh word from the text. The only time that I deviated from this pattern was when I had to avoid deleting any content that could not be gauged by the reader (for example, an amount or an age). In these cases, I deleted the next possible word.

Cloze tests are used to determine knowledge of a language in terms of proficiency (Brown 2002: 79) as opposed to knowledge of a subject. Although one of the key indicators of a successful cloze test is the difficulty of the material (Abraham & Chapelle 1992: 469), in this case, the cloze test is effectively determining the difficulty of the plain-English material according to the mother tongue of the reader as I am comparing the results across three mother tongue groups.

3.6 The cloze test in use

Although the text was sourced from the internet, the test was printed on paper and completed in writing by the participants. As stated above, every seventh word was deleted. Deleted words were replaced by lines of the same length for each deletion and were identified by consecutive numbers from 1 to 100. Each participant was provided with a separate answer sheet with 100 consecutively numbered spaces of equal size for the written answers.

⁹ The original text was longer than that used for the test. I wanted to ascertain whether the participants would reasonably be able to complete a cloze test based on the original text in one lecture period. Because they could not do so, I made use of an extract of the full text when I set up the cloze test for the main study; participants could complete this shorter cloze test in one lecture period.

¹⁰ For the cloze test used during the pilot study, every fifth word was deleted, but this level of difficulty made the test too long to complete within one lecture period. I therefore made use of a cloze test in which every seventh word was deleted during the main study.

3.7 The test procedure

In most instances, the lecturer whose class was being used introduced me to the participants and briefly explained why I was there and why it was important for them to cooperate and perform to the best of their abilities. When the lecturer was unable to be present, I conveyed this message.

In addition to the cloze test, participants were asked to complete a short language background questionnaire (see Appendix C) including questions on the following:

- Age
- Highest level of education
- Language of instruction for this qualification
- Mother tongue language
- Age of first exposure to English
- Self-assessment of English reading, writing, speaking and understanding skills

The consent form (see Appendix B), language background questionnaire (see Appendix C), cloze test (see Appendix D) and answer sheet were handed out to each student. Thereafter, I took ten minutes to:

- explain the study,
- obtain consent,
- give instructions,
- have the consenting participants complete the language background questionnaire,
- explain how the cloze test works, and
- answer any questions that the students had.

The remaining 40 minutes of the class were allocated to the completion of the cloze test. All students (those who chose to participate, those who started to participate but then changed their minds and did not complete the test, and those who were not interested in participating) remained in the classroom for the full duration of the class. At the end of the 40 minutes, all forms (also empty and half-completed forms) were collected from the participants.

3.8 Scoring and data analysis

Two types of responses are considered in the study, as will be seen in Chapter 4, where the data analysis is presented: an exact match and an acceptable match. An exact match ignores spelling and inflection (thus working with word families¹¹), for example, if 'cover' was the deleted word, 'covers', 'covering' and 'covered' would also be marked correct; if 'residents' was the deleted word, 'resident' and 'residence' would also be marked correct.

Determining what constitutes an acceptable match is more complex, because not only synonyms of the target words were provided by the participants but also semantically related words. For instance, for the target 'salary', 'salaries' would be an exact match; 'wage', 'wages', 'earning', 'earnings', 'remuneration', and 'pay' would be acceptable matches; 'purse', 'riches' and 'notes' would be unacceptable matches; but it is not clear whether 'income', 'fees' and 'payment' would necessarily be an acceptable match in the specific context. In order to attain a measure of objectivity and correctness, I approached an actuary, who specialises in risk insurance at the company whose text I used, for assistance. The reason for approaching an actuary specifically is that an actuary typically writes the wording for insurance policies. I provided him with the cloze test and the list of non-exact responses provided by the participants that could potentially fill the gap. He indicated which would be acceptable in order for the meaning and intent of the passage to be maintained.

Once I had sourced all the data, I allocated a unique code to each set of participant responses and captured the responses from the language questionnaire and the responses from the cloze test onto an Excel spreadsheet. I was able to immediately score exact matches. I then sent the 'questionable' responses to the actuary for a decision on the acceptability of those responses that were not exact matches, as explained above.

I then analysed the responses statistically in a manner that would allow me to compare the three L1 groups (Afrikaans, English, isiXhosa) in terms of various measures. I wanted to ascertain whether there are correlations between certain factors (such as language of learning and teaching) and the scores on the cloze test, i.e. the level of understanding of a plain-English text.

¹¹'Word-family' refers to the word and all its inflected and derived forms considered as one (Nation 2006). For instance, "the word-family of *abbreviate* contains the following members: abbreviate, abbreviates, abbreviated, abbreviating, abbreviation, abbreviations" (Nation 2006:63).

A one-way ANOVA test was conducted to compare groups in terms of their mean average and exact match scores. To test the effect of grade 12 education on possible group differences, a two-way ANOVA test was conducted with ‘group’ and ‘grade 12 education (y/n)’ as the two variables. Post hoc testing was done using Fisher’s least significant difference (LSD) procedure. For comparison of grade 12 education between groups, cross tabulation with the Chi-square test was done.

3.9 Ethical considerations

After being informed of the purpose and nature of my study, the college gave me written permission to use some of their classes in order to gain access to their students. The college requires that students attend a certain percentage of classes during the semester. This attendance requirement would guarantee that I would be able to reach the number of participants I was aiming for instead of having to source volunteers myself.

The college was eager for their students to participate in the study due to the practice it would give the students in completing an English language test and also because it would give them a broader understanding of how research – and one’s participation in the research – contributes to society (Acting Principal, personal communication, 2017).

The students still had to take part voluntarily, and they had the option to withdraw at any time if they no longer wished to participate, but students were not permitted to leave the classroom until the end of the lesson, in accordance with the college’s rules. Some students chose to participate and others not. In one case, a student did complete the test but at the end of the class requested that it be discarded because the funeral text did not apply to him culturally. This data set was excluded from the results.

The study and the consent requirements were explained to the students verbally. The printed consent form was explained to the students and the confidentiality and anonymity of the provided information and results were stressed. The consent form was not translated into Afrikaans or isiXhosa. I deemed this unnecessary as the students were attending a college where the sole language of instruction is English, so a certain level of proficiency must be inferred from their acceptance into the college. Students were allowed to ask for clarification and other questions about the consent form and the test procedure.

Unique codes were applied to each participant's set of completed documents, comprising the consent form, answer sheet and language background questionnaire, when the participant handed it in at the end of the session.

Students under the age of 18 were still allowed to complete the test, on request of the college, because the college wanted all students to experience participation in a study of this nature. However, because they were not eligible for inclusion as participants, their consent forms were not signed, and their responses were excluded from the final set of data. Students whose mother tongue was a language other than English, Afrikaans and isiXhosa were likewise allowed to complete the test, but their responses were also excluded from the final set of data.

Students were advised that the results of the study as a whole (but not individual test scores) will be made available to the college in due course and that the college will make the results of the study available to the students through a suitable communication channel.

3.10 Methodological challenges and considerations

3.10.1 Delivery method of the test

As stated above, the text was sourced from the internet and, ideally, the test should have been carried out on a computer. This would have given the students the exact experience of interacting with the online text *in situ*. For logistical reasons (e.g. the various campuses not having suitable computer user areas; me not having access to a large number of laptops; the limited period of time available for data collection, as determined by my study schedule as well as by the college), a paper-based test was the only feasible means by which to conduct the study. I catered for the difference in medium (electronic versus paper) by making the printed version similar to the online version by replicating the layout, font style and font sizes as closely as possible.

In addition to the reasons mentioned above, the challenges of conducting the test online as opposed to on paper included:

- Creating a web page to mimic the selected page
- Creating a programme that would allow the participants to input the results and allow me to capture the results

- Finding sufficient time for training participants to use the web page correctly, which would be necessary considering that some students may have low computer literacy.

3.10.2 The matter of English proficiency

I considered the matter of the English proficiency levels of the Afrikaans and isiXhosa speaking participants before undertaking any data collection. I contemplated the usefulness of conducting an English language proficiency test as part of the study but discarded this option because of the fact that the college uses English as its sole language of instruction. This implies that the proficiency level of L2 speakers at the college must be reasonable in order for them to cope with the demands of learning at this level. (Note that the college reported that they did pre-placement English language proficiency tests, but I did not have access to their data.) For this reason, self-assessment of proficiency acted as a proxy for language proficiency tests, which is not an unproblematic practice, as discussed in section 4.4.

3.10.3 Approach changes adopted as a result of the live pilot test

I ran a live pilot (using students at the college) in one of the classes at the college in order to improve my data collection procedure. This live pilot proved invaluable. I assumed that the students would be able to multi-task during the time set aside for instructions – read through the consent form as I explained the background to the study and gave the instructions for test. This proved to be an incorrect assumption.

During the live pilot, the students did not complete the language background test in its entirety nor did all of them complete it in accordance with the written instructions. For example, one student ticked the language self-assessment (indicating which languages they can read, write, understand and speak) instead of allocating a score (in order to rate their ability to read, write, understand and speak these languages). Only one of the students completed the consent form with a full name; the rest of the students only used their first name. Some students also completed the test using phrases, despite the written instructions stating that single words only were required.

Consequently, I amended my approach as follows:

- I doubled the time I had allocated for instructions from five minutes to ten minutes.
- I went through each document one at a time with the group.

- I explained the consent form and then also explained that the participants needed to fill in their full name and surname, signature and the date to give their consent.
- I took the students through the language background questionnaire question by question to give everyone the opportunity to keep up and complete what was required and to allow them to ask questions as soon as there was something on the questionnaire which they did not fully understand.
- I explained how to do the cloze test and showed a few simple examples on the whiteboard to demonstrate.
- I stressed that the deletion requires specifically to *one* missing word.

3.10.4 Participant apathy

The students differed in their attitudes with regard to participating in the study. Some gave the text their full attention and diligently completed the cloze test; others displayed what I perceived to be apathy. As a result, it is not possible to deduce whether poor scores indicate a lack of ability or an abundance of apathy, and in some cases, this may have affected the results negatively.

Similarly, it is not clear whether some participants did not complete the test as a whole, or some of the responses individually, because they were unable to do so or because they were bored or became disinterested and thereby terminated their participation prematurely without indicating this to me when they handed in their documents. On the one hand, some may not have completed the test because:

- they ran out of time after spending too much time trying to decipher the earlier deletions.
- they were unable to decipher the deletions.
- they did not want to complete the test.
- the text was not engaging enough to maintain their interest.

On the other hand, it is possible that those who did complete the test:

- found it easy.
- were familiar with the subject matter.
- enjoyed taking part in the test.

3.10.5 Bilingual participants

In some classes, participants asked what language to state as their mother tongue if they were bilingual. This is not uncommon in the Western Cape, particularly for fully bilingual speakers of Afrikaans and English. Participants were instructed to consider which language they identified with the most to determine their L1 and they were also instructed to choose only one. This might, however, have led to some participants being placed into an L1 group in a somewhat artificial manner.

CHAPTER 4: ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

4.1 Introduction

The objective of this study was to determine whether L2 speakers of English, with isiXhosa or Afrikaans as L1, found a plain English text to be as comprehensible as their English mother tongue counterparts did. This assumes that L1 English speakers would, indeed, find a plain English text comprehensible.

The variables that were considered in relation to a participant's L1 were:

- language of teaching and learning
- number of years speaking English
- education level (Grade 12 completed or not)

These factors were analysed on the basis of whether or not a correct response (an exact or acceptable word) was supplied in place of a deleted word from a text in a cloze test. This enabled me to establish whether there are correlations between certain factors (such as language of learning and teaching) and the scores on the cloze test. Supplying an exact or acceptable correct response was considered to be an indication of comprehension of that part of the text.

I prepared the raw data for statistical analysis by inserting each participant's data (comprising the language background information and exact and acceptable response scores) into a row in an Excel spreadsheet according to the corresponding category of each column.

The data comprising exact and acceptable response scores, as explained in section 3.8, was statistically analysed according to the:

- undifferentiated results of all participants
- LOLT
- LOLT and L1
- number of years of speaking English and LOLT
- level of education and LOLT
- complete or incomplete secondary level of education and LOLT

The actual responses yielded by the participants were then scrutinised according to the applicable plain language techniques discussed in section 3.4.3. The techniques that were possible to analyse based on their occurrence in the text include:

- Use simple, familiar words
- Be cognisant of optimal sentence length
- Cut unnecessary words
- Use verbs and nouns
- Prefer the active voice to the passive voice

This is followed by a short discussion on the results of the L2 language proficiency self-assessment completed by the participants.

4.2 Analysis and interpretation of the data

The different variables were analysed individually as well as in various combinations. In each case, exact match scores are provided and discussed before acceptable scores.

4.2.1 Undifferentiated exact match scores

The undifferentiated exact match scores indicate the exact scores achieved by all the individual participants (all three language groups together) without applying any filters according to variables. The average exact match score obtained by the participants when viewed as one group was thus 30%. The mean and median are very close in value, namely 30 and 31, respectively. Figure 4.1 below shows the distribution of exact scores for all the participants.

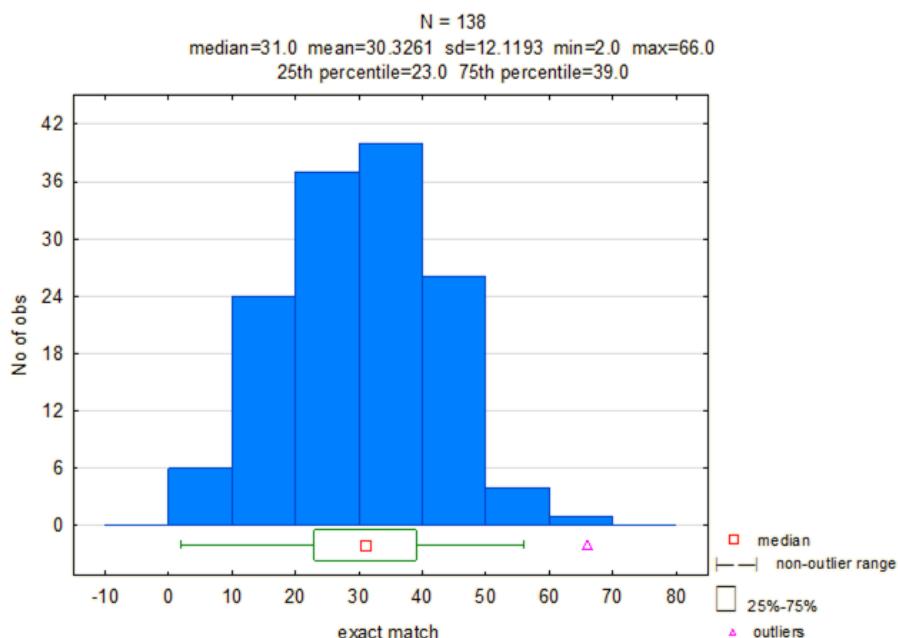


Figure 4.1: Undifferentiated exact match scores (all three groups combined)

4.2.2 Undifferentiated acceptable match scores

The undifferentiated acceptable match scores (in Figure 4.2 below) indicate the acceptable scores achieved by all the individual participants considered together without applying any filters according to variables. The average acceptable match score obtained by the participants when viewed as one group was 38%. This mean of 38 signifies that, on average, 62% of the text was not comprehended by the participants. As expected, the participants scored better for acceptable responses than for exact responses, although the difference between the means of the exact and the acceptable match scores was only 8%.

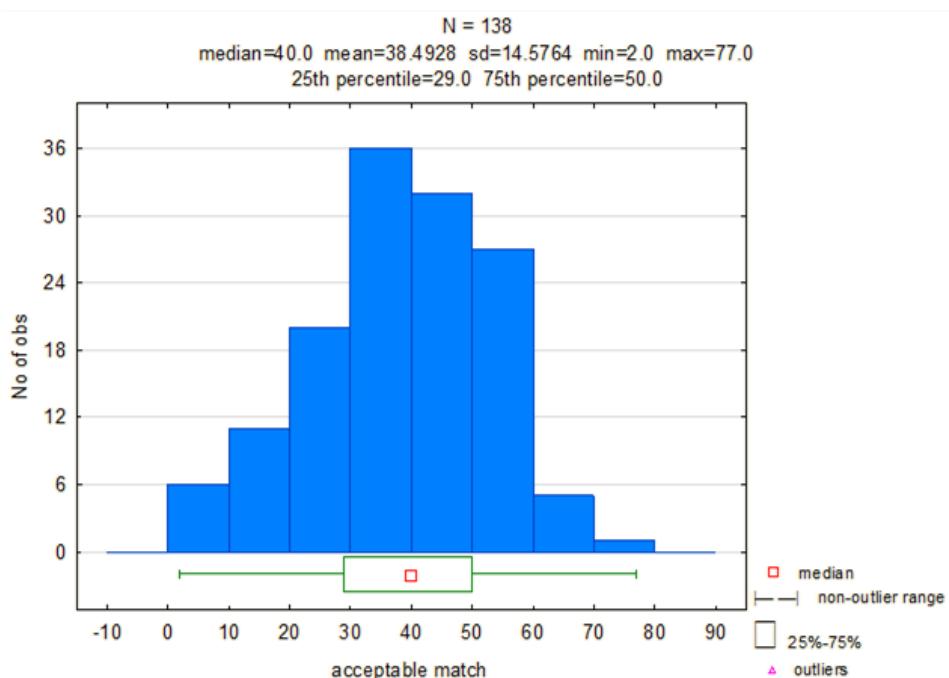


Figure 4.2 Undifferentiated acceptable match scores (all three language groups combined)

4.2.3 LOLT comparison: exact match and acceptable match

According to Foley (2010), “[m]ost current research suggests that learners entering school are able to learn best through their mother tongue, and that a second language (such as English) is more easily acquired if the learner already has a firm grasp of his/her home language”. It seems, however, that around the world, many children do not learn in their L1 (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization 2016); South Africa is no exception as Figure 4.3 suggests.

Focusing on the variable LOLT, those taught in Afrikaans while at school did statistically significantly better than those taught in isiXhosa ($p = 0.03$). However, there was no

statistically significant difference between those taught in English with either the isiXhosa ($p = 0.17$) or Afrikaans ($p = 0.12$) LOLT groups. This makes sense as those taught in English have come from a variety of mother tongue backgrounds, not just English, whereas those in the isiXhosa LOLT and Afrikaans LOLT groups typically have only isiXhosa and Afrikaans as L1, respectively. The mean scores were as follows:

Type of score	LOLT		
	isiXhosa	English	Afrikaans
Exact match	24.83	30.03	36.12
Acceptable match	32.42	38.28	44.12

Table 4.1: Average correct responses on cloze test, per LOLT group

The mean scores illustrated in the table above indicate that:

- all three LOLT groups performed poorly (the highest mean score obtained, for acceptable matches, was 44%,
- for both the exact scores and the acceptable scores, the isiXhosa LOLT group fared significantly worse than the Afrikaans LOLT group (for the exact match significantly so, $p = 0.03$, but the difference between groups was not statistically significant for the acceptable match scores, $p = 0.07$),
- the English LOLT group stayed in the middle of the other two LOLT groups for both the exact and acceptable responses, and
- all three LOLT groups improved by more or less the same percentage on their acceptable match scores.

It must be noted, however, that although isiXhosa is an official LOLT in South African schools, learners are only permitted to write their final Grade 12 examinations in either Afrikaans or English. The schools decide whether to switch to English (or Afrikaans) as LOLT and when to do so, or they may simply choose that code switching be employed during lessons. Webb, Lafon and Pare (2010: 279) put this into context:

[A] striking feature of the South African education system is that whilst the majority of white, coloured and Indian learners are taught, learn and are assessed in their home language (Afrikaans or English), this is not the case for a large section of the black school population, who, from Grade 4 onwards at least, have to learn and demonstrate

their understanding, knowledge and skills through a language which is, at best, an L2 or even an L3.

A consequence of having isiXhosa as LOLT may result in limited English input by the teachers in the lead-up to final Grade 12 examinations. It also calls into question the nature and quality of such input as teachers, with an isiXhosa L1 teaching in an isiXhosa-dominant environment where their inclination is to teach mainly in the L1 of their students, may not necessarily have adequately high levels of English language proficiency required for effective English-as-LOLT teaching. Furthermore, this suggests that a learner's isiXhosa L1 is not maintained and reinforced as the LOLT throughout their school career because of the need to prepare to write examinations in another language.

4.2.4 The combination of mother tongue and LOLT

Figure 4.3 below shows the distribution of participants according to the combination of mother tongue and LOLT based on count and percentage. They are split into the following groups:

- isiXhosa L1 with isiXhosa as LOLT (Xh_Xh)
- isiXhosa L1 with English as LOLT (Xh_Eng)
- isiXhosa L1 with Afrikaans as LOLT (Xh_Afr)
- English L1 with English as LOLT (Eng_Eng)
- Afrikaans L1 with English as LOLT (Afr_Eng)
- Afrikaans L1 with Afrikaans as LOLT (Afr_Afr)

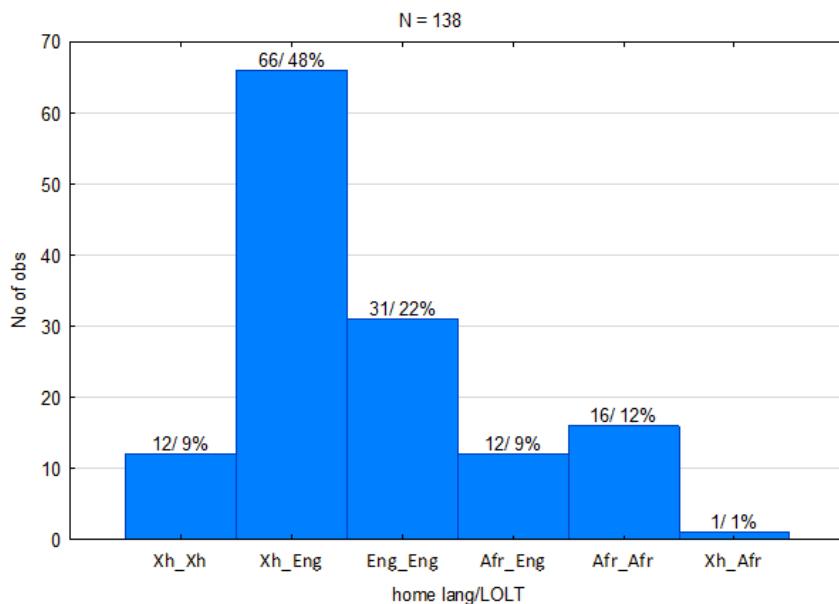


Figure 4.3 Number of participants, per L1-and-LOLT group

When measuring performance based on the combination of LOLT and L1, the trend established in section 4.2.3 continues. As shown below in Figure 4.4, the English L1/English LOLT group performed the best out of the five groups (the data of the isiXhosa L1 with Afrikaans as LOLT group was not considered, because this group had one member only), but the average achieved for the more lenient acceptable answers of 49% indicates that even the best performing group does not quite comprehend 50% of the text.

In explanation of Figure 4.4, the mean scores for each group are indicated by the circle in the midpoint of each vertical line. The letters on the graph indicate statistically significant differences between groups. If one letter occurs in both of two groups compared (for example, the letter ‘b’ occurs in both ‘bc’ and ‘ab’), then the means of those two groups are not statistically significantly different. If there is no repeat of letters (for example, ‘a’ vs ‘bc’), then the difference between the means of the two groups is statistically significant.

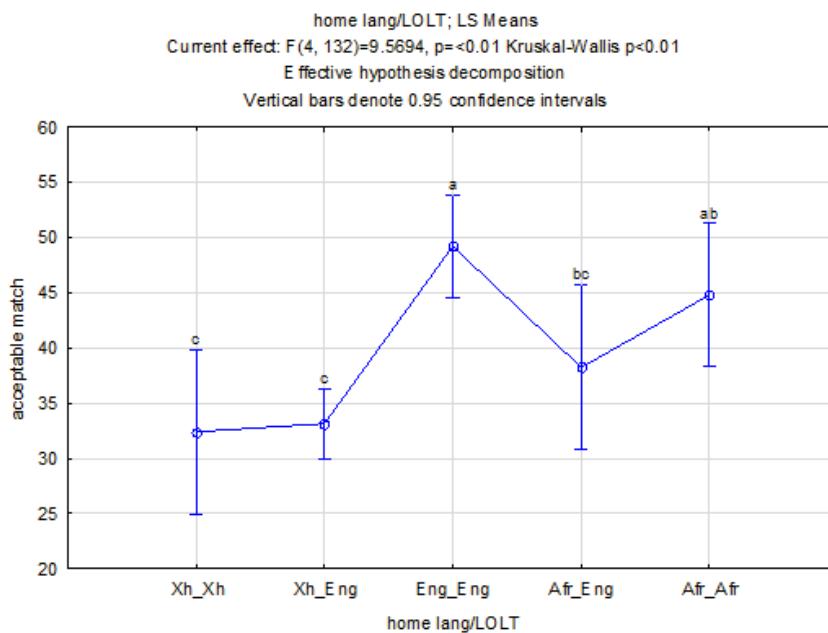


Figure 4.4 Acceptable match scores, per L1-and-LOLT group

The performance of the English L1 with English as LOLT group was significantly better than both isiXhosa L1 groups and the Afrikaans L1 with English as LOLT group, while there is no significant difference between that of the English participants who had English as LOLT at school and the Afrikaans participants who had Afrikaans as LOLT at school. This suggests that participants schooled in their mother tongue of Afrikaans will benefit from plain English just as much as their English L1 counterparts (albeit a minimal benefit, as the results demonstrate). The same cannot be said for those isiXhosa-speaking students who had been schooled in isiXhosa, as they fared significantly worse than the other two groups schooled in their L1s.

It is possible that those participants who indicated that they had been taught in isiXhosa were more likely to have attended schools in more rural areas where English is less of a lingua franca and where isiXhosa is prevalent. Consequently, their exposure to English would be expected to be lower than that of the isiXhosa participants who had English as LOLT at school. Even so, the scores between the isiXhosa L1 group with isiXhosa as LOLT and the isiXhosa L1 group with English as LOLT displayed no significant difference.

The results for the Afrikaans L1 with Afrikaans as LOLT group give credence to the research (Foley 2010; Stoop 2017; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization 2016) that suggests there is an advantage to receiving an education in one's mother tongue, particularly, no doubt, when that mother tongue is supported by all possible resources. In such cases, Afrikaans L1 teachers teach mother tongue speakers of Afrikaans in Afrikaans, in an Afrikaans-speaking community and are supported by the full range of educational resources

available in Afrikaans, while the learners write their examinations in their L1, have the reinforcement of their L1 at home and are exposed to Afrikaans in many (if not all) aspects of their daily lives. This suggests a different scenario to that of the isiXhosa L1 group with isiXhosa as LOLT, described in section 4.2.3.

As can be seen in the Table 4.2 below, the mean scores for the exact responses for the isiXhosa L1 with isiXhosa LOLT group and those of the isiXhosa L1 with English as LOLT group barely differ. The same is the case when considering their acceptable matches. This suggests that the LOLT that the mother tongue speakers of isiXhosa had received their education in is immaterial when it comes to how well (or, in this case, how poorly) they comprehend a plain English text. Furthermore, as evidenced by the scores, it appears that regardless of whether an L1 isiXhosa speaker receives their education in their mother tongue or in English, their English language skills are not sufficiently cultivated to comprehend a plain English text.

The performance of the Afrikaans L1 with English as LOLT group does not differ statistically significantly from either of the isiXhosa groups, nor does it differ statistically significantly from the Afrikaans L1 group who had Afrikaans as LOLT.

Type of score	L1_LOLT at school				
	isiXhosa_isiXhosa	isiXhosa_English	English_English	Afrikaans_English	Afrikaans_Afrikaans
Exact match	24.83	25.45	39.74	30.08	36.75
Acceptable match	32.42 ^c	33.15 ^c	49.23	38.25	44.81

Table 4.2: Average correct responses on cloze test, per L1-and-LOLT group

4.2.5 The combination of number of years speaking English and LOLT

In testing whether there were differences based on the length of time an English L2 participant had been speaking English for, no differences were found ($p = 0.44$).

As illustrated in Figure 4.5 below, those participants who were taught in isiXhosa estimated that they had been speaking English for 14 years on average, while those participants who were taught in Afrikaans estimated that they had been speaking English for 12 years on average. The L1 isiXhosa speakers who were taught in English indicated an average of just under thirteen years of speaking English. Interestingly, the average indicated for the those taught in isiXhosa is the highest of the three groups, although not statistically significantly so.

With an average of 12 years of speaking English, those students who were taught in Afrikaans did statistically significantly better than those taught in isiXhosa, despite the isiXhosa participants reporting an average of 14 years of speaking English.

This result calls into question the quality of education for students taught in isiXhosa, which, as has already been explained in section 4.2.3, does not officially take place in isiXhosa, as well as the quality of the English language to which the L1 isiXhosa speakers have been exposed for 14 years.

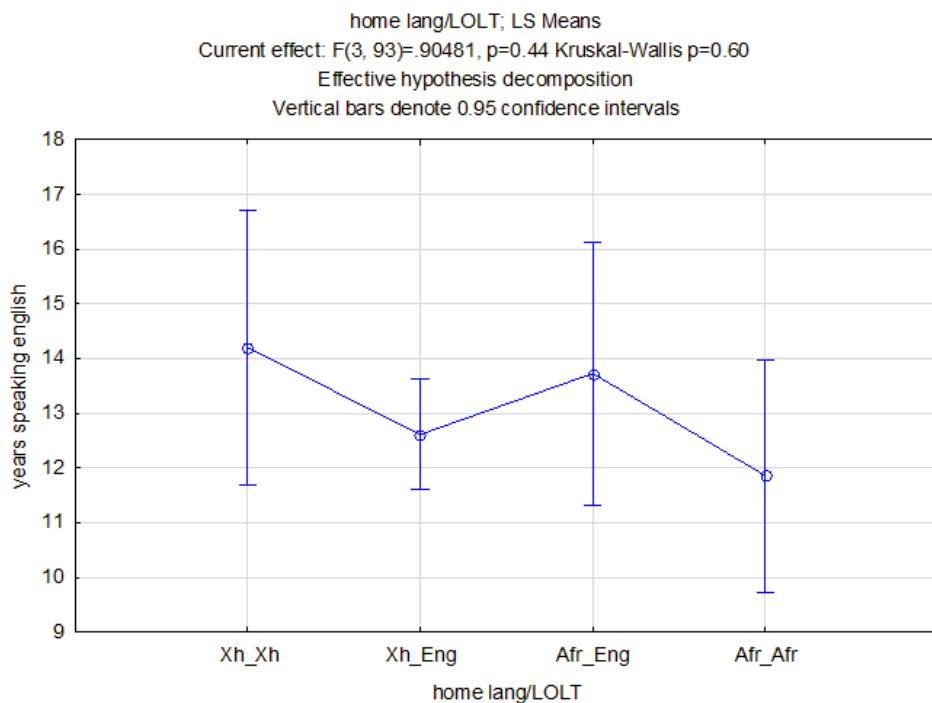


Figure 4.5 Length of time speaking English, per L1-and-LOLT group

4.2.6 The combination of education level and LOLT

As can be seen in Figure 4.6 below, almost half of the participants in the study had completed their secondary education, while another third had completed Grade 11. For no participant was the highest school grade completed lower than Grade 8.

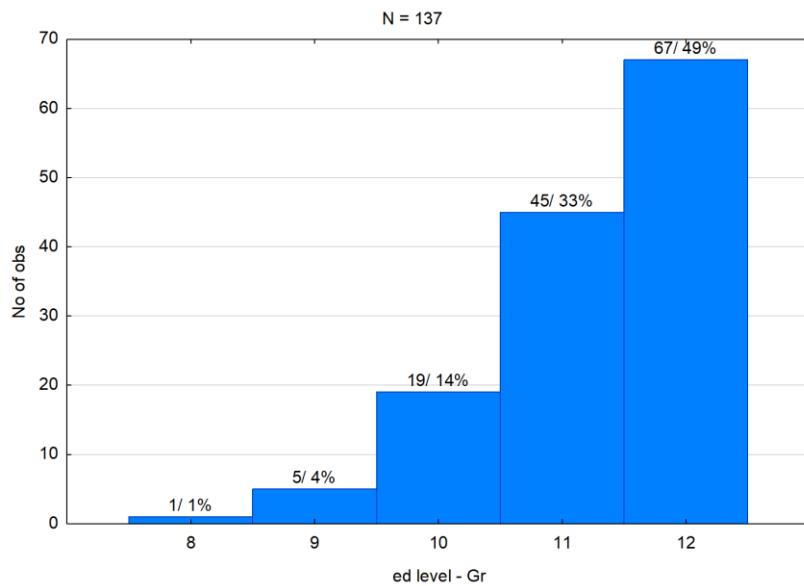


Figure 4.6 Education level of participants (all three language groups combined)

Students taught in Afrikaans at school averaged 11.8 years of schooling, whereas those schooled in isiXhosa averaged 11.1 years. Interestingly, the Afrikaans L1 participants who were taught in Afrikaans were more likely to complete high school (81%), while the isiXhosa L1 participants who were taught in isiXhosa were the least likely to complete their schooling (75%), as can be seen in Figure 4.7 below.

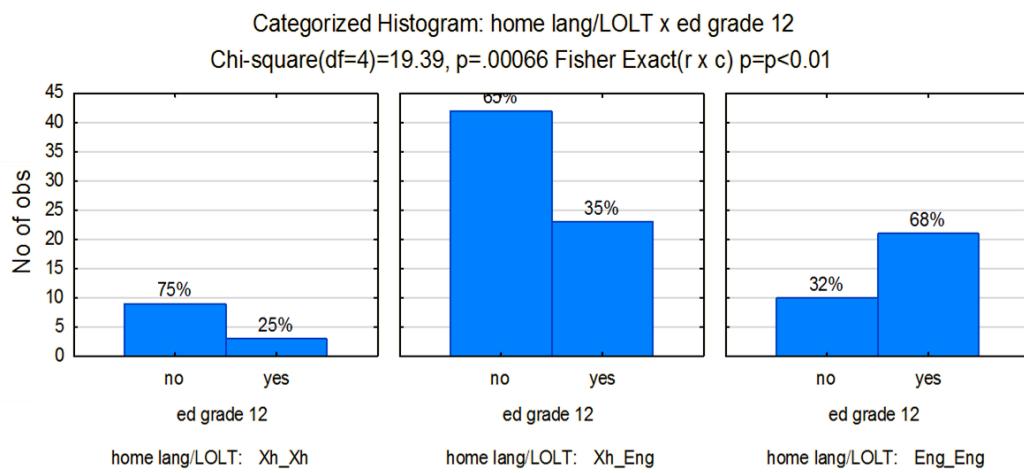


Figure 4.7 Completion and non-completion of Grade 12, per L1-and-LOLT group (isiXhosa and English)

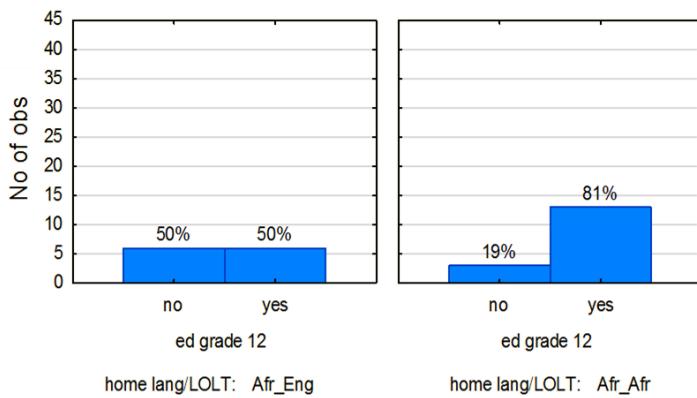


Figure 4.8 Completion and non-completion of Grade 12, per L1-and-LOLT group (Afrikaans)

4.2.7 The combination of a complete/incomplete Grade 12 and LOLT

Participants with a Grade 12 (all language and LOLT groups combined) had a mean acceptable match score of 41% while those without a Grade 12 scored an acceptable match mean of 36%. This difference in mean scores was not statistically significant ($p = 0.70$). Consequently, it seems that for all participants, regardless of L1, education level does not make much of a difference in being able to understand a plain English text.

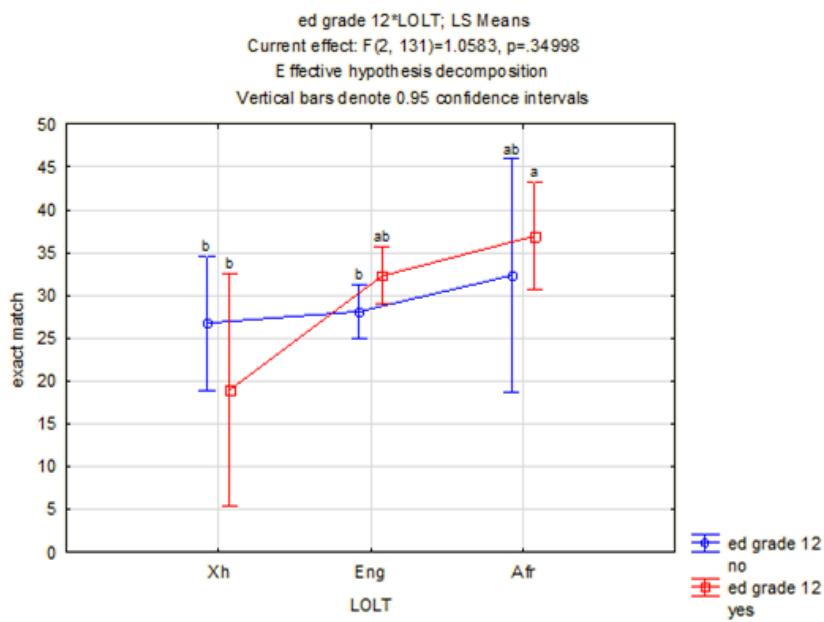


Figure 4.9 Exact match scores, per completed/not-completed Grade 12 and LOLT

Even with a completed secondary education, the participants were still unable to fully comprehend the text. In fact, based on the 41% mean mentioned above, almost 60% of the text was not comprehended by those who would be presumed more likely to do so – high school graduates. (However, the participants are students at a college of further education and training,

so although some may not have a Grade 12, they are still sufficiently proficient in English to have gained access to the college.)

Having a Grade 12 or not makes no difference to the exact scores of those participants taught in isiXhosa at school, as seen in Figure 4.9. Furthermore, participants taught in isiXhosa with and without a Grade 12, performed just as well as participants taught in English, regardless of whether the English LOLT participants had a Grade 12. The participants taught in Afrikaans with a Grade 12 outperformed those taught in English with a Grade 12, although not statistically significantly so. The participants taught in Afrikaans with a Grade 12 also outperformed both groups of participants – with and without a Grade 12 – taught in isiXhosa and in both these cases the difference in the mean scores was statistically significant. Only this group of participants (those with a Grade 12 who had been taught in Afrikaans at school) – and, interestingly, neither group taught in English – outperformed the isiXhosa groups.

The relatively poor performance of the English LOLT groups, both with and without a Grade 12, can be attributed to the fact that it comprises students from all three L1 groups – Afrikaans, English and isiXhosa. So, the benefit of a mother tongue education only applies to a portion of the English LOLT participants.

The same pattern explained above for exact scores emerged for acceptable scores in the sense that within each LOLT group, there was no statistically significant difference between those participants who had completed Grade 12 and those who had not.

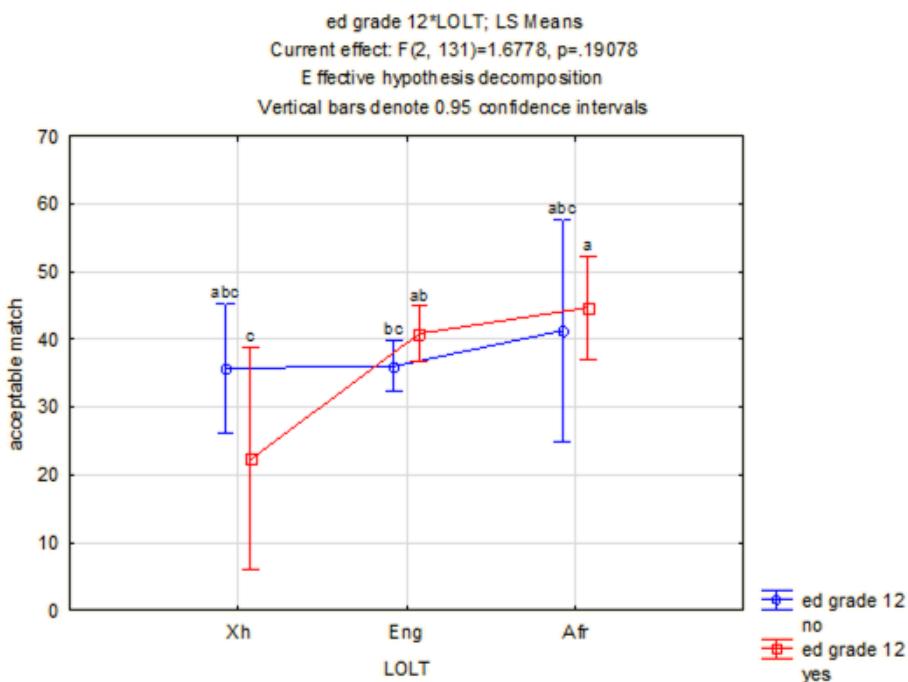


Figure 4.10 Acceptable match scores, per completed/not-completed Grade 12 and LOLT

The only statistically significant difference in mean scores was between:

- the Afrikaans LOLT and English LOLT groups, on the one hand, and the isiXhosa LOLT group, on the other, who had all completed Grade 12, and
- the Afrikaans LOLT group who had completed Grade 12 and the English LOLT group who had not.

These results demonstrate that the students taught in Afrikaans who have a Grade 12 deal more successfully with the plain English text than all the other groups (although not always statistically significantly so), although this Afrikaans group still does not exhibit a full comprehension of the text. We can surmise that the following factors are beneficial to the Afrikaans LOLT group:

- Students are more likely to have an Afrikaans L1 if they are in an Afrikaans LOLT school
- There is access to Afrikaans resources at the school, in the home and in the community
- The teachers at Afrikaans LOLT schools are predominantly Afrikaans L1 speakers teaching in their L1
- The majority of students in Afrikaans-medium schools are learning in their L1; and
- Students in Afrikaans-speaking schools have a home and community environment in which using Afrikaans is the norm.

These factors could lead to learners in Afrikaans-medium schools receiving more input in their L1, and input from various sources, than learners in a school in which isiXhosa is the LOLT or learners for whom their LOLT, but not their L1, is English. According to Place and Hoff (2011; 2016), an increase in the number of speakers using the language with the child, positively increases the quality of the exposure to the language that a child receives. This could place the Afrikaans LOLT learners at an advantage compared to the isiXhosa L1 learners who have English as LOLT.

4.3 Observations about the exact and acceptable responses yielded

The nature of the cloze test makes it possible to delve more deeply into certain plain English techniques to determine whether they may or may not have played a role in aiding the

participants' comprehension of the text. The techniques that can be investigated due to their observability include:

- Use simple, familiar words
- Be cognisant of optimal sentence length
- Cut unnecessary words
- Use verbs and avoid noun strings and nominalisations
- Prefer the active voice to the passive voice

Not every technique can be directly assessed via the cloze test. The exclusion of the other plain English techniques discussed in section 3.4.3 (namely: Punctuate correctly; Consider document design; Organise logically; Use headings; Use vertical lists when appropriate) does not suggest that they did not play a role in rendering the text plain or facilitating comprehension. It simply means that it is not possible to evaluate them by analysing their use or appearance in the text using the cloze test method.

Recall that in the cloze test, every seventh word was deleted from the text. The only times that I deviated from this pattern were when I had to avoid deleting any content that could not be gauged from the context (for example, an amount or an age). In these cases, I deleted the next possible word. As the words were deleted randomly from the text, there may not always have been an example or sufficient examples of a construction from which to surmise any influence of specific techniques (used or not used).

The results are discussed according to the count of responses yielded per language grouping. The number of participants in each group is: 31 English, 28 Afrikaans and 79 isiXhosa L1 speakers. A correct response is defined as the total number of exact and acceptable responses.

4.3.1 Did the use of simple, familiar words aid comprehension?

In order to establish whether simple and familiar words aided the participants in comprehending the text, I will examine some examples of complex words, consider an example of a simple word, and inspect an anomaly. I also consider some words in relation to their parts of speech and number of syllables.

4.3.1.1 'Traumatic'

The first deletion in the cloze test appeared in the first sentence:

'A death in the family is traumatic impacting both your emotions and your finances.'

Although the deletion yielded 131 responses, the word ‘*traumatic*’ was clearly unfamiliar as only 19 participants were able to provide a correct response, and only one of those provided was an exact match, as Table 4.3 indicates. Incorrect responses included ‘*your*’, ‘*is*’, ‘*very*’, ‘*a*’, ‘*not*’, ‘*always*’, and ‘*the*’, suggesting that, for many participants, the immediate context did not support the deletion sufficiently for them to deduce the deleted word.

	Responses			
	Exact		Acceptable	
	<i>traumatic</i>	<i>tragic</i>	<i>devastating</i>	Total correct
Afrikaans	0	3	0	3
English	1	6	2	9
isiXhosa	0	6	1	7

Table 4.3 Responses yielded for the deletion ‘*traumatic*’

4.3.1.2 ‘Extended’

In the following sentence, the word ‘*extended*’ proved problematic for most participants.

‘*You can also cover extended family with our Extended Family Funeral Rider.*’

Although the target word appeared later in the sentence in the name of the product, it did not aid the vast majority of participants, as only 16 in total gave a correct response (see Table 4.4). Only 12 participants provided an exact match – possibly by making use of the given information in the sentence to assist with their deduction. As the target word, in precisely the same form, appears again in the same sentence, it would not have been unreasonable to expect a higher number of correct responses for this deleted word. The fact that the number of correct responses was still low implies that the participants are probably not highly experienced or sophisticated readers.

	Responses				
	Exact		Acceptable		Total correct
	<i>extended</i>	<i>more</i>	<i>close</i>	<i>additional</i>	
Afrikaans	0	1	0	1	2
English	5	1	0	0	6
isiXhosa	7	0	1	0	8

Table 4.4 Responses yielded for the deletion ‘*extended*’

4.3.1.3 ‘External’

One of the lowest scores yielded from the cloze test was for the word ‘external’, deleted from the sentence below:

‘Policy fees and external provider benefit fees are also excluded from this benefit.’

Only three acceptable answers were yielded from 82 attempts, with no participants correctly identifying the target word. As this is new information about an ‘external provider’, it may be somewhat confusing to the reader, as the only parties that have been mentioned up to this point are ‘you’ and ‘us’. Now an external provider is mentioned for the first time when the topic of fees arises. The most prevalent, yet incorrect, responses of the 80 received include ‘the’, ‘insurance’, ‘your’, ‘cover’ and ‘policy’.

	Responses		
	Exact	Acceptable	Total correct
	<i>external</i>	<i>service</i>	
Afrikaans	0	2	2
English	0	0	0
isiXhosa	0	1	1

Table 4.5 Responses yielded for the deletion ‘external’

4.3.1.4 ‘Ceremony’

Lexical cohesion is defined as “the underlying connection between so-called ‘content words’ (noun, verbs, adjectives, adverbs) in consecutive sentences” (Van de Poel, Carstens & Linnegar 2012: 77). Lexical cohesion should be considered as a factor in relation to the comprehension of the next example, as the deleted word ‘ceremony’ is a word we could reasonably expect to find in a text related to funerals due to the associated meaning between ‘ceremony’ and the funeral-related topic of the text. Considering, also, that funerals are culturally important to the majority of the participants, as explained in section 3.1.1, ‘ceremony’ could therefore reasonably be expected to be a familiar word. However, as illustrated in Table 4.6, only seven responses were correct.

A possible reason for the low number of correct responses is the first part of the compound noun that occurs immediately before ‘ceremony’, viz. ‘unveiling’, as seen in the sentence below. This compound (‘unveiling ceremony’) may be less common than, for instance, ‘funeral ceremony’, and this may have interfered with comprehension at this point in the

sentence. Note, however, that no frequency counts in South African or other corpora were done; hence this is only suggested as a possibility.

'This benefit pays out up to R10,000 that you can use to cover costs for an unveiling ceremony, after the death of the insured person (or their partner). '

The most prevalent, yet incorrect, responses of the 84 provided include 'benefit', 'funeral', 'death', and 'costs'.

	Responses			Total correct	
	Exact	Acceptable			
	<i>ceremony</i>	<i>event</i>	<i>service</i>		
Afrikaans	0	1	0	1	
English	2	1	0	3	
isiXhosa	2	0	1	3	

Table 4.6 Responses yielded for the deletion 'ceremony'

4.3.1.5 'Memorial'

Similarly, lexical cohesion could be considered as a factor in relation to the next example, 'memorial', as this term is another that could reasonably be expected to be a familiar word in this context.

This particular deletion is interesting in that the deletion appeared in the paragraph under the subheading '*Memorial Benefits*'. The preceding paragraph appeared under the subheading '*Monthly Provider*', and '*monthly provider*' precedes the target word as seen in the sentence below:

'Please note that the total of the funeral, monthly provider and memorial benefits cannot exceed R100,000 each for the main insured person and their insured partner. '

Thus, the broader text and the sentence contained cohesive clues.

The most prevalent, yet incorrect, responses of the 73 yielded include '*the*', '*extra*', '*monthly*' and '*your*', and there was no alternative to the exact response.

	Responses			Total correct
	Exact	Acceptable		
	<i>memorial</i>	(not applicable)		
Afrikaans	1	/	/	1
English	5	/	/	5

isiXhosa	3	/	3
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Table 4.7 Responses yielded for the deletion ‘memorial’

4.3.1.6 ‘Upon’

As the more formal version of ‘on’, ‘upon’ is the only preposition to appear in these examples. The acceptable match ‘for’, yielded the most correct responses, with ‘on’, the presumably simpler version, only yielding two responses.

‘*You’ll get paid out a lump sum of up to R120,000 upon your death or that of your insured partner.*’

Of the 81 responses provided 61 were prepositions, indicating that the required part of speech was identified, although this does not necessarily suggest that the meaning was correctly interpreted.

	Responses			Total correct	
	Exact	Acceptable			
	<i>upon</i>	<i>for</i>	<i>on</i>		
Afrikaans	0	10	0	10	
English	0	8	1	9	
isiXhosa	1	11	1	13	

Table 4.8 Responses yielded for the deletion ‘upon’

4.3.1.7 ‘Get’

The simple and familiar word ‘get’ appeared in the following sentence:

‘*You won’t need a medical exam in order to get a funeral plan insurance quote from us.*’

Despite the 117 responses, the participants achieved a correct score of only 49 in total, including acceptable matches (see Table 4.9) – less than half of all the respondents gave a correct answer. Other responses yielded for this deletion included ‘pay’, ‘be’, ‘cover’, and ‘benefits’.

	Responses			Total correct	
	Exact	Acceptable			
	<i>get</i>	<i>receive</i>	<i>obtain</i>		
Afrikaans	13	1	0	14	
English	12	3	1	16	

isiXhosa	16	2	1	19
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Table 4.9 Responses yielded for the deletion 'get'

4.3.1.8 'Rider'

The term '*rider*' presents an anomaly. It is a technical term unknown to the participants from all three language groups, as evidenced by having no exact matches yielded from the responses, and which confirms the danger of using such jargon in a text intended for laypersons. However, 110 correct responses were received, which resulted in one of the highest scores.

We can surmise that the participants were able to deduce acceptable matches based on the context and the simple sentence structure surrounding the technical term, despite the noun string that makes up the product name. It is also possible that the verb '*cover*', which appears earlier in the sentence, as shown below, prompted the use of '*cover*' as a noun when faced with the deletion.

'You can also cover extended family with our Extended Family Funeral Rider.'

A correct response of '*cover*' by half the participants, as indicated in Table 4.10, supports this supposition.

	Responses				
	Exact	Acceptable			Total correct
		<i>rider</i>	<i>cover</i>	<i>insurance</i>	
Afrikaans	0	7	4	7	18
English	0	12	3	12	27
isiXhosa	0	51	5	9	65

Table 4.10 Responses yielded for the deletion 'rider'

The term '*rider*' appears again later in the text (see the sentence below) and is immediately followed by the deletion 'you'.

'Note that this only applies to the main insured person and their partner, and no payments are paid back on the death of any other insured life, or any riders you may have had.'

This deletion yielded a total of 93 responses, 11 of which were correct (L1 Afrikaans: 3; L1 English: 2; L1 isiXhosa: 6), which would suggest that the use of the unfamiliar term '*rider*' had a negative effect on the comprehension of this portion of the text.

4.3.1.9 Parts of speech and syllables

Correct responses yielded for the following deletions exceeded 80% (a count of 110 or more) indicating that the relevant deleted word can be considered simple and familiar:

- ‘hours’ (noun) in: *We pay out fast: all valid funeral policy claims are paid out within 48 hours of receiving all the required documents.* This is the highest correct response yielded, presumably due to the general high frequency of use of the phrase ‘48 hours’.
- ‘plan’ (noun) in: *You can extend your funeral plan to an additional 5 children, paying a separate amount for each extra child.*
- ‘your’ (determiner) in the heading: ‘*A Funeral Insurance Policy to Protect Your Entire Family*’.
- ‘years’ (noun) in: *Anyone can apply for a quote - we accept all South African citizens or legal permanent residents in South Africa between 18 and 75 years old (certain Ts & Cs apply).* This is once again undoubtedly due to the high frequency of the phrase (‘years old’).

Conversely, of the 100 deletions in the cloze test, one third of them yielded correct responses of below 25% (a count of 34 or less). For example, the noun ‘total’ in the following sentence yielded only one correct response.

‘Please note that the total of the funeral, monthly provider and memorial benefits cannot exceed R100,000 each for the main insured person and their insured partner.’

Similarly, the adverb ‘along’ as part of the phrase ‘*along with*’ in this sentence, yielded two acceptable matches.

‘If you pass away, get all the funeral payments that were paid for your cover over the life of your policy paid out, along with your sum insured.’

The determiner ‘your’ in the sentence below yielded six correct responses.

‘For a small extra monthly payment, you can get funeral cover for your parents and partner’s parents up to R20,000 each.’

This small sample illustrates that the participants did not perform better (or worse) with any particular part of speech. A deleted noun elicited the highest number of correct responses and a deleted noun elicited the lowest number of correct responses.

Two thirds of the 33 deletions that received correct responses of 25% or less from the participants, were two syllables or more in length. Of the top 13 scoring deletions for which scores of over 70% were achieved, 11 were single syllabled and two had two syllables. (One was ‘*rider*’ which was discussed in section 4.3.1.8.)

This is particularly interesting because of the fact that the words were deleted from the text; in other words, the participants did not read these specific words *in situ* in the text. Yet the results suggest that the length of the word still influenced its difficulty or simplicity even when unseen.

4.3.1.10 Summary

The results suggest that simple and familiar words aided the participants with comprehension, while the more complex words did the opposite. Using common words with one or two syllables seems to be optimal, although there are undoubtedly common words with more than two syllables which would also be acceptable to use, depending on the target audience.

4.3.2 Did the length of the sentence affect the results?

As explained in section 3.4.3.2, longer sentences containing subordinate clauses put a heavier processing burden on the reader (see Azpiroz 2015: 8 for a discussion of the processing of main vs subordinate clauses). The assumption would be, therefore, that longer sentences would negatively affect the cloze test results. Furthermore, plain English proponents recommend an average sentence length of 15–20 words (Cutts 2013: 1) and 20–25 words (Butt 2002: 179). For the purpose of this evaluation, the recommended range is consolidated at 15–25 words.

In order to test this assumption in the context of the cloze test, I selected a range of sentences to assess as follows:

- All four sentences in the longer length range of 30 words or more. (Although there are five sentences in this range, I excluded one sentence as I suspect it contains an error as explained in section 3.4.3.6.)
- Four randomly selected sentences in the recommended length range of 15–25 words.
- Four sentences that contained deletions (not all short sentences contain deletions) in the shorter length range of 1–10 words were randomly selected from the sentences in this range.

The selected sentences are listed below and the word count and number of deletions per sentence are given.

Longer sentence 1 (LS1)

'Cushion yourself against financial pressure with funeral insurance from X that protects you and your loved ones with a lump sum paid within 48 hours - provided we've received all the required documents and your claim is valid.'

38 words – 5 deletions

Longer sentence 2 (LS2)

'Anyone can apply for a quote - we accept all South African citizens or legal permanent residents in South Africa between 18 and 75 years old (certain Ts & Cs apply).'

30 words – 4 deletions

Longer sentence 3 (LS3)

'Note that this only applies to the main insured person and their partner, and no payments are paid back on the death of any other insured life, or any riders you may have had.'

34 words – 5 deletions

Longer sentence 4 (LS4)

'It pays out up to R2000 per month if the insured person passes away, so your family can use these 12 monthly instalments to pay for groceries or any other essential everyday expenses.'

33 words – 4 deletions

Recommended length sentence 1 (RS1)

'Add life cover for you and your partner to your existing funeral insurance policy for just a small extra monthly payment.'

21 words – 3 deletions

Recommended length sentence 2 (RS2)

'You'll be paid out a lump sum of 20% of all the funeral insurance policy premiums you've paid after every 5 years.'

24 words – 4 deletions

Recommended length sentence 3 (RS3)

'You can extend your funeral plan to an additional 5 children, paying a separate amount for each extra child.'

19 words – 2 deletions

Recommended length sentence 4 (RS4)

'The minimum age you can add this benefit is 18 and the maximum age is 65.'

16 words – 2 deletions

Shorter sentence 1 (SS1)

'This is funeral insurance you can actually afford.'

8 words – 1 deletion

Shorter sentence 2 (SS2)

'Permanent residents'

2 words – 1 deletion

Shorter sentence 3 (SS3)

'Parents and partner's parents (under the age of 75)'

9 words – 2 deletions

Shorter sentence 4 (SS4)

'Must have a bank account'

5 words – 1 deletion

Table 4.11 below shows the number of sentences (from the selection above and identified according to the abbreviations noted in brackets) that have all the deletions correctly identified according to language group.

L1	Number of sentences with all deletions correct per language group											
	LS1	LS2	LS3	LS4	RS1	RS2	RS3	RS4	SS1	SS2	SS3	SS4
Afrikaans	1	1	0	9	0	0	15	6	5	3	2	12
English	1	2	0	9	0	0	15	3	11	3	5	12
isiXhosa	1	1	0	14	2	0	19	5	25	12	12	25
TOTAL	3	4	0	32	2	0	49	14	41	18	19	49

Table 4.11 Number of sentences (select) with all deletions correct per language group

While the scores illustrated in Table 4.11 do not offer a definitive answer as to whether sentence length impacted the comprehensibility of the text, they do suggest that overall, the participants performed better when the sentences were in fact very short. The number of short sentences with all deletions correctly completed amounted to 127, compared to 65 for the recommended length of between 15 and 25 words, and 39 for sentences longer than 30 words.

There is, of course, the question of whether it would be easier to gauge the meaning of a single deletion in a sentence compared to that of multiple deletions in a sentence, because of the fact that multiple deletions would disturb the flow of the text and make it more difficult for the reader to make cohesive connections. So, is it the length of the sentence that makes comprehension difficult, or is it simply the fact that more words are deleted from it?

I propose that the number of deletions contained in a sentence is immaterial and that it is application (or lack of application) of the plain language techniques that determines the reader's ability to deduce an appropriate response. In other words, whether one deletion is correctly identified in a short sentence, or more deletions are correctly identified in a long sentence, is determined by the appropriate use of suitable plain language techniques.

Other factors should also be taken into account when assessing a sentence – like the words used (simple and familiar or complex; or function or content words, a distinction which was not considered in the analysis) and the syntactic structure of the sentence. In terms of the relationship between words and sentences, there does not appear to be a correlation between simpler words scoring higher in shorter sentences or more complex words scoring lower in longer sentences. (The words that scored highest came from the whole range of sentence lengths; the same is true for the words that scored lowest.)

Nevertheless, the findings explained above support the plain language guideline that advises writers to keep their sentences short and suggests that sentence length did affect the results.

4.3.3 Did the inclusion of unnecessary words affect the results?

By removing unnecessary words from a text, sentence length is reduced, and the information is more clearly conveyed (Cutts 2013: 53). Eliminating unnecessary words will often involve rewording and rewriting, but that is not possible to discern in the text. It is only possible to observe the apparent unnecessary words that have been retained.

As noted in section 3.5, the words were deleted randomly from the text, which means that there may not always have been an example or sufficient examples of a construction from which to surmise any influence of specific techniques (used or not used). Consequently, two examples follow.

The unnecessary word ‘*up*’ appeared in this sentence:

‘Funeral cover from R10,000 up to R75,000.’

This word can be considered redundant because the words ‘*from*’ and ‘*to*’ indicate a range without needing any help from ‘*up*’. There was a total of 90 exact matches for this deletion suggesting that although the word is deemed unnecessary because it plays no useful role in the sentence, it did not interfere with the comprehension of the sentence and that the participants are, in fact, familiar with its use in this way.

By comparison, a similar construction, where the necessary word ‘*up*’ was deleted, received a total of 43 matches; see Table 4.12 below.

‘Add a small amount to your monthly funeral insurance payment and cover your partner and/ or spouse for up to R75,000.’

Interestingly, 58 of the 114 total responses yielded were a rand value (such as ‘R10,000’), which may suggest that the participants expected the same construction as they had previously encountered. (Recall, however, that deletions of rand value were avoided in the cloze test as the participants could not reasonably be expected to gauge such information from the context.)

	Responses	
	Correct	Incorrect
	<i>up</i>	a rand value
Afrikaans	11	10
English	10	15
isiXhosa	22	33
TOTAL	43	58

Table 4.12 Comparison of correct and incorrect responses for the deletion ‘*up*’

In another example, the unnecessary word ‘*out*’ was deleted from the following sentence in the text:

‘You’ll get paid out a lump sum of up to R120,000 upon your death or that of your insured partner.’

The fact that the sentence makes sense without the word ‘*out*’ (i.e. ‘You’ll get paid a lump sum’) could have resulted in confusion for the participants when trying to determine what was missing. This assumption is reinforced by the low number of correct responses yielded – a total of 29 (L1 Afrikaans: 9; L1 English: 13; L1 isiXhosa: 7).

In summary, it appears that unnecessary words should be eliminated according to the needs of the reader. In other words, if a word considered unnecessary by a plain English practitioner is in common use by the audience in a particular phrase, nothing will be gained by eliminating it, as demonstrated in the first example. Similarly, if the word is deemed unnecessary based on the common usage of the phrase, retaining such a word could negatively affect comprehension. This is reflected in the second example where ‘pay out’ can be considered jargon as the more common use is simply ‘pay’.

4.3.4 Did the use of verbs and the avoidance of noun strings and nominalisations affect the results?

As verbs convey action more directly and clearly than nominalisations, they are considered to be more beneficial in aiding comprehension. Nouns strings occur when a ‘string of nouns’ is used to modify a noun, which the reader can find difficult to decipher. While it is not possible to determine whether any noun strings and nominalisations were avoided in compiling the text, it is possible to observe whether the noun strings and nominalisations that do appear in the text affected the results. Several examples are reviewed below.

4.3.4.1 The use of verbs

As the verb ‘to be’ is the most common English verb (Oxford English Corpus n.d.), it would be reasonable to expect the participants to be practised in its use. The verb ‘is’ was deleted in two instances, and neither instance produced good results.

The sentence below yielded 95 responses, of which 41 were correct. As can be seen in Table 4.13, more than half of the responses were not correctly identified as verbs. These incorrect responses were mostly nouns and adjectives, for example, ‘family’, ‘cover’, ‘affordable’ and ‘best’.

‘This is funeral insurance you can actually afford.’

	Responses	
	Correct	Incorrect
	<i>is</i> (verb)	not a verb
Afrikaans	5	15
English	11	12
isiXhosa	24	25
TOTAL	41	49

Table 4.13 Comparison of correct and incorrect responses for the first instance of the deletion ‘is’

In the second instance of the deletion of ‘is’ shown below, a total of 82 responses were yielded. While 37 participants correctly identified the missing verb, 41 proposed incorrect responses, most of which were prepositions, for example, ‘to’, ‘from’ and ‘for’. The scores per language group are illustrated in Table 4.14.

‘The minimum age you can add this benefit is 18 and the maximum age is 65.’

	Responses	
	Correct	Incorrect
	<i>is</i> (verb)	not a verb
Afrikaans	11	6
English	14	12
isiXhosa	13	23
TOTAL	37	41

Table 4.14 Comparison of correct and incorrect responses for the second instance of the deletion ‘is’

The verb ‘get’, which despite a high number of responses scored poorly, has already been discussed in section 4.3.1.7. The test, however, contains another instance of the verb ‘get’, in the following sentence:

‘If the insured person passes away, you’ll get an Avis rental vehicle that you can use for three days to organise the funeral.’

Of the 126 responses yielded for this deletion, every one was a verb. There were, in total, 101 correct responses (L1 Afrikaans: 22; L1 English 25; L1 isiXhosa 54) which made it the verb with the highest number of correct responses.

The above examples indicate the range of participants being able to correctly identify the syntactic category of the deleted word.

4.3.4.2 A nominalisation

As explained in section 3.4.3.4, the sentence below could be made more active by replacing the nominalised ‘payment’ for the active verb ‘pay’, resulting in, for example: Pay a small amount more.

‘For a small extra monthly payment, you can get funeral cover for your parents and partner’s parents up to R20,000 each.’

From 118 responses, a total of 53 correct responses were yielded (L1 Afrikaans: 9; L1 English: 14; L1 isiXhosa: 30). Incorrect responses included ‘income’, ‘amount’ and ‘fee’, and

although considered incorrect, they do indicate that the participants recognised the sense of missing word.

4.3.4.3 Noun strings

A number of noun strings appear throughout the text, for example, ‘*funeral insurance quote*’, ‘*funeral insurance policy*’, ‘*funeral plan insurance quote*’ and ‘*funeral policy claims*’. The noun string ‘*funeral insurance policy premiums*’ in the sentence below yielded 39 correct responses (L1 Afrikaans: 9; L1 English: 10; L1 isiXhosa: 20).

‘You’ll be paid out a lump sum of 20% of all the funeral insurance policy premiums you’ve paid after every 5 years.’

Another noun string can be found in the name of the product ‘*Extended Family Funeral Rider*’ (i.e. ‘*Family Funeral Rider*’) in the sentence below. This deletion is explained in section 4.3.1.8 as it unexpectedly obtained one of the highest correct scores of 110.

‘You can also cover your family with our Extended Family Funeral Rider.’

In the final example, the sentence below yielded a total of 56 correct responses (L1 Afrikaans: 17; L1 English: 14; L1 isiXhosa: 26) for the noun string ‘*funeral policy claims*’.

‘We pay out fast: all valid funeral policy claims are paid out within 48 hours of receiving all the required documents.’

The examples provided above indicate the range of the number of correct responses yielded for noun strings – from 36 to 56 to 110. It is possible that deletion being the last word in the noun string may be the reason for the high number of correct responses for the ‘*Family Funeral Rider*’ noun string, as the other two deletions appeared in the third place out of four and in the first place out of three.

In summary, it appears that using a verb instead of a nominalisation did not yield better results. However, this assumption is based on having only one nominalisation to evaluate. Even so, less than half of the responses yielded for the nominalisation were correct. The evaluation of the noun strings shows a large variation in results, but two of the examples discussed yielded less than half correct responses.

4.3.5 Did the use of the passive voice affect the results?

Plain English proponents claim that the use of the passive voice is less effective than the use of the active voice (Cutts 2013: 63; Butt 2002: 179). It is not possible to test the full passive verb as the cloze test allows for only one word to be deleted, not phrases.

In the sentence below, it is possible to test the first part of the passive verb – ‘are’.

Note that this only applies to the main insured person and their partner, and no payments are paid back on the death of any other insured life, or any riders you may have had.’

As explained in section 3.4.3.5, the passive voice is used intentionally to divert the focus from the insurer not returning a payment, which would be emphasised in an active construction.

From a total of 98 responses, 32 were correct (L1 Afrikaans: 11; L1 English: 8; L1 isiXhosa: 13).

In the sentence below, it is possible to test the second part of the passive verb – ‘received’.

Cushion yourself against financial pressure with funeral insurance from X that protects you and your loved ones with a lump sum paid within 48 hours - provided we've received all the required documents and your claim is valid.'

The use of the passive construction may not be unreasonable in this instance if the author does not want to specify who is responsible for ‘doing the giving’. Perhaps it is not only the client who will be providing the required documents and so the focus is shifted to the organisation who will be ‘doing the receiving’. However, if the client is responsible for providing the documents, this should be made clear in an active sentence construction.

The deletion ‘*provided*’ yielded a total of 108 responses of which 47 were correct (L1 Afrikaans: 7; L1 English 16; L1 isiXhosa 25). Other responses yielded included ‘*covered*’, ‘*given*’, ‘*been*’, and ‘*had*’. Although ‘*had*’ was not considered correct, it does suggest that the participants had deduced the sense of the deletion, while ‘*given*’ suggests that passive caused some confusion.

By comparison, the active voice saw the following results across three example sentences below.

This benefit pays out up to R10,000 that you can use to cover costs for an unveiling ceremony, after the death of the insured person (or their partner). ’

The above sentence yielded a total of 52 correct responses (L1 Afrikaans: 12; L1 English: 17; L1 isiXhosa: 23). The following sentence yielded a total of 77 correct responses (L1 Afrikaans: 20; L1 English: 25; L1 isiXhosa: 32).

'You won't need a medical exam in order to get a funeral plan insurance quote from us'.

The last example-sentence below yielded a total of 28 correct responses (L1 Afrikaans: 6; L1 English: 12; L1 isiXhosa: 10).

'Our Family Funeral Benefit covers a maximum of 5 children, up to R20,000.'

In summary, the discussion above suggests that the participants achieved better results for sentences in the active voice, implying that passive constructions may indeed have affected comprehension negatively.

4.4 Self-assessment results

The language background questionnaire was used to collect information from the participants about their age, education, language of learning and teaching, mother tongue, and length of time speaking English. This information comprised the variables according to which the data from the cloze test was analysed.

In addition, participants were asked to rate their English language proficiency skills for reading, writing, speaking, and understanding according to the following scale: no skills, poor, average, and good. The self-assessment was intended to gauge whether a correlation existed between the participants' estimation of their skills and that of the results of the cloze test.

Self-assessments are not typically good indicators of actual skill; according to Gaffney (2018: 239), "recent studies have shown low or non-existent correlations between self- and other-assessed skills". Webb, Lafon and Pare (2010: 279) corroborate Gaffney's assertion in their claim that black learners in the South African education context overestimate their level of English language proficiency.

Out of the 79 L1 isiXhosa speakers in this study, 55 gave a self-rating of good and 23 gave a self-rating of average for reading in English. Similarly, 42 of the isiXhosa speakers gave a

self-rating of good and 35 gave a self-rating of average at understanding English. Of the 35 L1 isiXhosa speakers who self-rated good for both reading and understanding, the average score achieved for the cloze test was 43¹². One participant who self-rated average for both reading and understanding achieved a total score of 2 out of 100.

	Reading		Understanding		Total
	Good	Average	Good	Average	
Afrikaans	18	9	14	14	28
English	26	5	30	1	31
isiXhosa	55	23	42	35	79

Table 4.15 Self-assessment scores for reading and understanding

Out of the 28 L1 Afrikaans speakers, 18 gave a self-rating of good and 9 gave a self-rating of average for reading in English. However, half of these participants rated themselves as good and the other half rated themselves as average for understanding. Of the 11 L1 Afrikaans speakers who self-rated good for both reading and understanding, the average score achieved for the cloze test was 44¹². One participant with a self-rating of good for both reading and understanding received a total score of 6 out of 100.

Out of the 31 L1 English speakers, 26 gave a self-rating of good and 5 gave a self-rating of average for reading. For understanding, 30 participants rated themselves as good while one participant self-rated as average. Of the 25 L1 English speakers who self-rated good for both reading and understanding, the average score achieved for the cloze test was 50¹².

These self-assessment scores imply that the students have little self-awareness about their actual skills in English, including the English L1 participants.

Interestingly, one isiXhosa speaker rated himself as having no skills in speaking English – a grave concern for a student attending an English LOLT college. In fact, self-assessed speaking in English got the most ‘poor’ scores from the 107 English L2 participants. In addition, the fact that the most ‘poor’ scores for a language skill was 7 is also indicative of Gaffney’s (2018: 239) “low or non-existent correlation between self- and other-assessed skills” explained above.

¹² This evaluation is based on observations of the data and has not been statistically analysed. For that reason, some numbers may differ to those discussed in the statistical analysis in section 4.2.

It is possible that two factors could have influenced how the participants completed the self-assessments. Firstly, the participants were instructed to self-rate according to their first instinct. Perhaps their self-ratings would have yielded more realistic scores if they had been asked to take their time in considering an appropriate rating. Secondly, had the participants completed the self-assessment after they had completed the cloze test, they may have rated themselves differently.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

This study investigated the comprehensibility of a plain language English text for L1 speakers of Afrikaans and isiXhosa. English L1 speakers were included in the study as a control group and the results of the research also shed light on their level of understanding of a plain language English text. Previous studies on the comprehensibility of a plain language text for English L2 speakers are lacking; in fact, there is a dearth of such research on the multicultural and multilingual South African environment.

The objective of the study was to determine whether English L2 speakers benefitted from a plainly compiled text and to ascertain whether L1 speakers of English enjoyed a significant advantage over English L2 speakers in the comprehension of the plain English text.

The text used in the study was determined to be plain because:

- an analysis of the text revealed the use of generally agreed-upon plain English guidelines, which were also assessed (see section 3.4), and
- legislation compels organisations such as the one that compiled the text to compile their material in accordance with plain language principles (see section 2.3.1), implying that we can assume in good faith that the organisation has attempted to adhere to the relevant plain language requirements in drafting this text.

The participants in this study were students at a Western Cape college of further education and training who were Afrikaans L1, English L1 or isiXhosa L1 speakers. The results of the cloze test were considered according to the variables of LOLT, years of speaking English, level of education and whether or not the student had completed Grade 12.

This chapter summarises the findings of the study, determines whether plain English aids the comprehensibility of a text for L2 speakers of English, discusses the limitation of the research undertaken, and suggests directions for future research in this field.

5.1 Summary of findings

Having determined the text in question to be a reasonable example of a plain English text, the comprehensibility of the text was tested using the cloze test method. Three groups of participants – Afrikaans L1 speakers, English L1 speakers, and isiXhosa L1 speakers – completed the cloze test. All three language groups fared poorly in terms of their

comprehension of the plain English text. The findings for the three L1 groups are discussed separately below.

5.1.1 Findings for Afrikaans L1 speakers

The Afrikaans L1 with Afrikaans LOLT group significantly outperformed the isiXhosa L1 groups who were schooled in either isiXhosa or in English. The Afrikaans LOLT group with a completed secondary education (i.e. with Grade 12) performed statistically significantly better than the isiXhosa LOLT group with a completed secondary education but still not to the extent that they showed good comprehension of the text.

5.1.2 Findings for English L1 speakers

The performance of the English L1 participants who had English as LOLT was expected to be better than that of the other language groups, particularly if the other groups did not have their L1 as LOLT. While the English L1 group with English as LOLT did perform the best out of the three groups, it must be stressed that even as the best-performing group, these participants did not comprehend half of the text.

5.1.3 Findings for isiXhosa L1 speakers

The isiXhosa L1 speakers fared the worst out of the three groups. The isiXhosa-speaking students whose LOLT was isiXhosa fared significantly worse than the other two L1 groups who had their L1 as LOLT. Furthermore, whether an isiXhosa L1 speaker receives their education in their mother tongue or in English makes no significant difference to their comprehension of a plain English text. In other words, isiXhosa L1 speakers do not seem to enjoy any benefit of an L1 LOLT when it comes to comprehending a plain English text, unlike their Afrikaans L1 counterparts, even though the Afrikaans comprehension level is comparatively not good.

5.1.4 General findings

Neither of the English L2 groups nor the English L1 group demonstrated good levels of comprehension for the plain English text tested in the study. English L1 speakers schooled in English and Afrikaans L1 speakers schooled in Afrikaans demonstrated similar levels of comprehension, suggesting that the benefit of being educated in one's mother tongue is

realised for these two groups, whereas no such benefit is realised for the isiXhosa L1 group whose LOLT was isiXhosa.

5.2 Factors contributing to the poor results of the cloze test

5.2.1 Was the ‘plain English’ text plain enough?

I analysed the text to determine whether it can be considered to be plain and my finding was that it could indeed be considered to be a plain language text. At the very least, it can be considered to tick the box of complying with certain guidelines of plain English as proposed by plain language experts. But, then, the question arises whether this is *plain enough for this audience*. It may indeed be good enough for an audience in the UK, Australia or the US where English is the truly dominant language, where there are not 10 other official languages and where the majority of the population does not speak an L1 other than English.

The text may be more than sufficient for these English-dominant countries in which the research on, the testing of, and the thinking about effective communication through plainer language has been tried and tested with English L1 speakers over many years (Lee 2014: 12; Schriver & Gordon 2010: 64). But the application of these guidelines does not necessarily make the text sufficiently plain for the intended South African audience.

Alternatively, it is possible that the participants did not perform well because all the plain English guidelines were not consistently applied. For example, consider the following sentence:

‘You won’t need a medical exam in order to get a funeral plan insurance quote from us.’

If a simple word like ‘get’ is surrounded by the clutter of the unnecessary ‘in order to’ and the noun string ‘funeral plan insurance quote’, despite being in a sentence of reasonable length that uses pronouns, the overall plain effect must undoubtedly be diminished, and consequently, the sentence’s comprehensibility reduced.

Based on the poor results on the cloze test discussed above, we could assume that:

- the plain text has not met the needs of the audience,

- the audience did not benefit from a text compiled according to international plain English guidelines, and
- the text is not in fact plain.

If plain language is dependent on the needs of the audience and the audience, or the participants in this study in this case, have not benefitted from the use of plain language techniques, we can deduce that the text is not in fact plain – at least not in a South African context.

While it appears that internationally advocated guidelines for plain English may not be sufficient for speakers of languages other than English, the results of this study show that it is not only English L2 speakers who did not benefit from the ‘plainness’ of the text – the English L1 speakers also performed poorly on the cloze test.

This suggests that – even for English L1 speakers, educated in English, with a completed secondary level of education – the positive effect of a plain text is not sufficient to produce a good level of comprehension. This means that not only should plain English guidelines be investigated for L2 speakers of English, they should also be specifically investigated for the South African population of which L1 English speakers form a small part (see section 2.3.2).

5.2.2 Can plain English be truly effective if the audience’s English proficiency is low?

As mentioned in section 2.3.1, Stoop & Chürr (2013: 536) question how plain language can be achieved if consumers do not understand the language of communication in the first place. I have also explained that the English language and literacy skills of L2 English speakers in South Africa are generally low (Posel & Zeller 2010: 5; Pienaar 2002: 146) and that even L1 reading skills are poor (Howie et al. 2017; Stoop & Chürr 2013).

Various pieces of South African legislation attempt to protect consumers through the incorporation of plain language provisions (see section 2.3.1). Those most in need of this protection are ostensibly those with the lowest levels of literacy and education. For South Africa’s plain language efforts to be truly effective, this is the audience that needs to realise the benefit of this plain language legislation.

This study was carried out using students at a college of further education and training who by virtue of their being at such a college cannot be considered to be illiterate or uneducated. This audience demonstrated a low level of comprehension of the plain language text tested.

Consequently, it would not be unreasonable to infer that those with lower literacy and education levels would fare even worse.

In its current form, developed for and tested on L1 speakers of English in English-dominant environments where English is also the most widely spoken language, plain English is not sufficient for the South African context where English is dominant but the L1 of less than 10% of the population.

5.3 Do L1 speakers of Afrikaans and of isiXhosa comprehend a plain language English-language text as well as L1 speakers of English do?

This study investigated the comprehensibility of a plain-English-language text for L1 speakers of Afrikaans and isiXhosa. The study was devised to test a plain English text, which was ascertained to contain characteristics of generally agreed-upon plain language techniques, with students at a South African college of further education and training. The hypothesis was that if the text is plain, college students who are not L1 speakers of English, but who study through the medium of English, should be able to comprehend the text as well as L1 speakers of English do.

The results of the study show that:

- L1 speakers of Afrikaans and isiXhosa did not demonstrate good comprehension of a plain English text, and
- While the L1 English speaking participants comprehended the text better than the Afrikaans L1 and isiXhosa L1 participants did, they still did not demonstrate good comprehension of the text.

It is not likely that the English L2 speakers benefitted from the plainly compiled text as evidenced by the low scores. A benefit should surely result in ‘comprehension’ of the document; the low scores suggest that this was not achieved.

L1 speakers of English did not enjoy a significant advantage over English L2 speakers in the comprehension of a plain-English-language text. Their comprehension was poor even though it was slightly better than that of the L2 participants.

5.4 Limitations of the study

Various factors may have impacted the efficacy of this study.

- The size of the language groups: The total number of participants in the study was 138, but the language groups were not equal in size which has the potential to impact the validity and reliability of the research.
- I did not conduct a language proficiency test: This was due to fact that the participants attend college where the LOLT is English. This presupposes a certain level of proficiency in English. However, this could have been a faulty assumption.
- I used a self-assessment to gauge whether a correlation existed between the participants' estimation of their English language skills and their scores on the cloze test: Self-assessments do not necessarily provide accurate information.
- I did not test a non-plain version of the text with the participants: As no 'non-plain' version of the text exists, it was not possible to ascertain whether a non-plain text would be more difficult to comprehend than a plain text. However, considering the low levels of comprehension of the text demonstrated by all three language groups, it is unlikely that a 'non-plain' text would have yielded better results.
- Generalisation of the results: The research was conducted using a specific group, i.e. students attending a college of further education and training in the Western Cape with Afrikaans, English or isiXhosa as L1. It is possible that the results are not generalisable to the rest of the population, particularly not those with lower levels of education.

5.5 Recommendations for future research

Further research into plain language has a critical role to play not just for South African consumers, but for the many millions of L2 English speakers around the world who need a reasonable command of the English language in order to be able to function fully as a member of society. Crystal (2008: 5) estimates the total number of non-native English speakers in the world to be two billion – a substantially higher number than that of native English speakers. Even if many of them have no need to use English in their daily lives, the number of non-

native speakers of English is still astounding, and the increasing need for plainly written English is unquestionable.

Although Schriver and Gordon (2010: 35) assert that “there is a limited corpus of formal or informal studies that were designed with a plain language agenda in mind”, Schriver (2014: 57) later contends that “there is a growing body of research that … can help us specify guidelines about writing and designing for particular countries, languages, audiences, situations, genres, domains, or subject matters”. This is where the focus of research on plain language is needed: more specifically, in this case, on pointed and practical guidelines for the South African context that take into account the influence of factors such as L1s spoken, multilingualism, low literacy levels, inadequate education, and cultural differences.

By addressing the above research need, we should be able to answer questions about the characteristics that make a text plain enough for some audiences but not for others, which could involve assessing the generally agreed-upon techniques (like those discussed in section 2.2.1) to establish which ones are effective for all audiences and which others would need to be adapted or amended to cater for local idiosyncrasies.

Furthermore, a sound method for assessing the effectiveness of plain language needs to be developed. A method that precisely guides writers and evaluators of plain language texts on how to apply the recommended techniques for the specific audience and context would be invaluable.

In addition, the current study could be expanded by testing different versions of the plain language text (with and without examples, scenarios, and other techniques) in order to isolate the constructions that would make the biggest difference to comprehension. Similarly, the text used in this study could be translated into Afrikaans and isiXhosa to determine how a similar audience would fare in their L1s.

5.6. Closing remarks

This study is the first of its kind and scope in determining the comprehensibility of an authentic plain-English-language text for L1 speakers of Afrikaans and isiXhosa. No studies on the comprehensibility of plain English for L1 Afrikaans and L1 isiXhosa young people who are soon to enter the job market could be traced.

The study shows that the legislation requiring the use of plain language principles is insufficient in truly meeting the needs of the consumers it is intended to protect. This might be because the legislation applies broad plain language principles that were originally conceived and refined for very different linguistic environments than that of South Africa.

A further problem that the study reveals is that the English language proficiency of the college students tested is too poor for the legislated plain language requirements to make a difference to improving their comprehension of a plain English text. This suggests that plain language is being charged with the role that should be the responsibility of education. In fact, it also suggests that by compelling business to write plainly for the consumer, the government is doing little more than window-dressing a systemic problem – that of a poor education system that is failing its citizens.

The inadequacy of some of the generally agreed-upon plain language techniques was ascertained by the analysis of the text and the analysis of the results of the cloze test. This can serve as an immediate warning to plain language practitioners to carefully consider the blanket application of the internationally developed guidelines, especially to audiences that are poorly educated and have low levels of literacy, as they do not necessarily cater for South Africa's unique context. The techniques may not be as useful as they need to be and it may give the practitioner a false sense of 'communicating plainly'.

My observations from an analysis of the text suggest that some plain language guidelines should be retained, some should be expanded, and that all need more thorough research. However, some of the observations could be contemplated for immediate improvement possibilities for L1 Afrikaans and L1 isiXhosa audiences:

- Prefer plain words to more complicated ones. Paying attention to the number of syllables would in general be good practice.
- Avoid jargon. With the example 'rider', which was deleted from the text, participants were able to gauge the meaning of the sentence and suggest acceptable matches for the deletion because of its very absence. Had the term not been deleted, it would most likely have negatively affected comprehensibility.
- Prefer shorter sentences to longer ones. Make your sentences even shorter than the recommended guidelines.
- Do not assume that your readers will benefit from lexical cohesion (see section 4.3.1.4). Their vocabulary may not extend as far as you might expect.

- What would constitute an unnecessary word for an audience in the UK or Australia may well be a standard part of the South African audience's English language variety and result in confusion for the reader by its absence.

The consequence for plain English in South Africa is that the guidelines that have been crafted for audiences in developed English-speaking countries have to be modified to be able to effectively cater to L2 speakers, and in fact L1 speakers, of English in South Africa taking cognisance of multicultural and multilingual factors.

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APPENDIX A: ORIGINAL TEXT

Funeral Cover You Can Afford

A death in the family is traumatic, impacting both your emotions and your finances. Cushion yourself against financial pressure with funeral insurance from Hollard that protects you and your loved ones with a lump sum paid within 48 hours - provided we've received all the required documents and your claim is valid. The best part? **This is funeral insurance you can actually afford.**

Key Benefits:

- Funeral cover from R10,000 up to R75,000.
- Get 20% cash back! You'll be paid out a lump sum of 20% of all the funeral insurance policy premiums you've paid after every 5 years.
- Optional policy cover for your partner, children and parents. You can also cover extended family with our Extended Family Funeral Rider.
- Additional funeral benefits such as the Monthly Provider and Personal Accident cover.
- Standard 3 day vehicle access benefit included.



Available to:

- South African citizens
- Permanent residents
- Between the ages of 18 and 75
- Must have a bank account

What Does Your Funeral Plan Give You?

- A funeral insurance quote drawn up specially for you and your needs - from R10,000 up to R75,000 of cover an immediate accidental death benefit which covers you as soon as we receive your first premium.
- An immediate accidental death benefit, covering you as soon as we receive your first payment.
- To make sure your cover keeps up with the rising cost of funerals, we'll increase your funeral cover and payments by 7% every year's
- Anyone can apply for a quote - we accept all South African citizens or legal permanent residents in South Africa between 18 and 75 years old (certain Ts & Cs apply).
- You won't need a medical exam in order to get a funeral plan insurance quote from us.
- We pay out fast: all valid funeral policy claims are paid out within 48 hours of receiving all the required documents.
- If the insured person passes away, you'll get an Avis rental vehicle that you can use for three days to organise the funeral.

A Funeral Insurance Policy to Protect Your Entire Family

- Partner – Add a small amount to your monthly funeral insurance payment and cover your partner and/ or spouse for up to R75,000.
- Children (under the age of 21) – Our Family Funeral Benefit covers a maximum of 5 children, up to R20,000. You can extend your funeral plan to an additional 5 children, paying a separate amount for each extra child.
- Parents and partner's parents (under the age of 75) – For a small extra monthly payment, you can get funeral cover for your parents and partner's parents up to R20,000 each.
- Get your payments back! If you pass away, get all the funeral payments that were paid for your cover over the life of your policy paid out, along with your sum insured. Note that this only applies to the main insured person and their partner, and no payments are paid back on the death of any other insured life, or any riders you may have had. Policy fees and external provider benefit fees are also excluded from this benefit.

Extra Benefits You Can Add to Your Funeral Insurance Policy

Monthly Provider

Cover your family's monthly expenses when you can no longer take care of them.

Our Monthly Provider is an extra benefit that you can add on to your funeral insurance policy. It pays out up to R2000 per month if the insured person passes away, so your family can use these 12 monthly instalments to pay for groceries or any other essential everyday expenses. This funeral benefit and your monthly payment increase by 7% every year.

Memorial Benefit

This benefit pays out up to R10,000 that you can use to cover costs for an unveiling ceremony, after the death of the insured person (or their partner). This benefit increases by 7% every year and your monthly payments do too. Please note that the total of the funeral, monthly provider and memorial benefits cannot exceed R100,000 each for the main insured person and their insured partner.

Life Cover Benefit

[Add life cover for you and your partner](#) to your existing funeral insurance policy for just a small extra monthly payment. You'll get paid out a lump sum of up to R120,000 upon your death or that of your insured partner. This benefit and your monthly payments increase by 7% each year. The minimum age you can add this benefit is 18 and the maximum age is 65.

APPENDIX B: CONSENT FORM

STELLENBOSCH UNIVERSITY CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

You are invited to take part in a study conducted by Sarah-Jane Coetzee, from the Linguistics department at Stellenbosch University. You were approached as a possible participant because you are a first-year student whose first language is either English, Afrikaans or isiXhosa.

1. Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study is to determine whether mother tongue speakers of various languages find 'plain English' easy to understand.

2. What will you need to do?

If you agree to take part in this study, you will be asked to provide some general information about yourself, but the nature of the information will be such that I will not be able to identify you in any manner. You will then read a piece of writing taken from a website and fill in the blanks with the words you think are missing.

3. Possible risks and discomforts

If you experience any discomforts or inconveniences when participating in this study, please bring this to my attention and we will halt your participation.

4. Possible benefits to participants and/or to the society

Plain English is prescribed by the government as the way to communicate in writing to the South African consumer. Determining whether first language speakers of languages other than English benefit from the use of plain English or not can assist with improving communication of a range of important documents. You will be making use of such documents as you enter society as adult consumers.

5. Payment for participation

There is no reimbursement for participation as the study will take place at your college during college hours.

6. Protection of your information, confidentiality and identity

Any information you share with me during this study and that could possibly identify you as a participant will be protected. No names, ID numbers or other identifying information are required for the study. All data will be securely stored and the data will not be accessible by any third parties.

The data collected will only be used in the exploration of the plain English issue outlined in number 1. Please note that you will not be able to opt out of the study once you have completed the cloze test, because I will not be able to identify and isolate your specific responses (given that the responses will be anonymous).

The information gathered and analysed is done so in pursuance of a Master's degree. The results may be published in accordance with the requirements of completing a Master's degree, however, anonymity will be maintained as explained above.

7. Participation and withdrawal

You can choose whether to be in this study or not. If you agree to take part in this study, you may withdraw at any time without any consequence. If you refuse to answer any questions you don't want to answer, your information will be withdrawn from the study.

8. Researchers' contact information

If you have any questions or concerns about this study, please feel free to contact Sarah-Jane Coetzee on 083 287 0079, and/or the supervisor Dr Frenette Southwood at Stellenbosch University on fs@sun.ac.za.

9. Rights of research participants

You may withdraw your consent at any time and discontinue participation without penalty. You are not waiving any legal claims, rights or remedies because of your participation in this research study. If you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant, contact Ms Maléne Fouché [mfouche@sun.ac.za; 021 808 4622] at the Division for Research Development.

10. Declaration of consent

As the participant I confirm that:

- I have read the above information and it is written in a language that I am comfortable with.
- I have had a chance to ask questions and all my questions have been answered.
- All issues related to privacy, and the confidentiality and use of the information I provide, have been explained.

By signing below, I _____ (name of participant) agree to take part in this research study, as conducted by Sarah-Jane Coetzee.

Signature of Participant

Date

11. Declaration by the principal investigator

As the **principal investigator**, I hereby declare that the information contained in this document has been thoroughly explained to the participant. I also declare that the participant has been encouraged (and has been given ample time) to ask any questions. In addition, the conversation with the participant was conducted in a language in which the participant is fluent.

Signature of Principal Investigator

Date

APPENDIX C: LANGUAGE BACKGROUND QUESTIONNAIRE

Language Background Questionnaire

1. How old are you?
2. Where do you live?
3. What is your highest level of education?
4. At which school did you achieve this level of education?
5. What is the language of instruction at this school?
6. What year are you in at False Bay College?
7. What is your first language/mother tongue?
8. If your first language is **not** English, at what age did you first start to speak English?
9. Rate your skills on the following languages using the following rating scale:

1 = no skills, 2 = poor, 3 = average, 4 = good

	Afrikaans	English	isiXhosa
Understand			
Speak			
Read			
Write			

10. In which circumstances do you speak the following languages?

	Afrikaans	English	isiXhosa
At home			
At college			
With friends			
At church			
At work			
Other (please specify)			

APPENDIX D: CLOZE TEST

Funeral Cover You Can Afford

A death in the family is **(1)**, impacting both your emotions and your **(2)**. Cushion yourself against financial pressure with **(3)** insurance from X that protects you **(4)** your loved ones with a lump **(5)** paid within 48 hours - provided we've **(6)** all the required documents and your **(7)** is valid. The best part? This **(8)** funeral insurance you can actually afford.

Key Benefits:

- Funeral cover from R10,000 **(9)** to R75,000.
- Get 20% cash back! **(10)** be paid out a lump sum **(11)** 20% of all the funeral insurance **(12)** premiums you've paid after every 5 **(13)**.
- Optional policy cover for your partner, **(14)** and parents. You can also cover **(15)** family with our Extended Family Funeral **(16)**.
- Additional funeral benefits such as **(17)** Monthly Provider and Personal Accident cover.
- Standard 3 **(18)** vehicle access benefit included.

What Does Your Funeral Plan Give **(21)**?

- A funeral insurance quote drawn up **(22)** for you and your needs - **(23)** R10,000 up to R75,000 of cover **(24)** immediate accidental death benefit which covers **(25)** as soon as we receive your **(26)** premium.
- An immediate accidental death benefit, **(27)** you as soon as we receive **(28)** first payment.
- To make sure your **(29)** keeps up with the rising cost **(30)** funerals, we'll increase your funeral cover **(31)** payments by 7% every year.
- Anyone **(32)** apply for a quote - we accept **(33)** South African citizens or legal permanent **(34)** in South Africa between 18 and 75 **(35)** old (certain Ts & Cs apply).
- You won't **(36)** a medical exam in order to **(37)** a funeral plan insurance quote from **(38)**.
- We pay out fast: all valid **(39)** policy claims are paid out within 48 **(40)** of receiving all the required documents.
- **(41)** the insured person passes away, you'll **(42)** an Avis rental vehicle that you **(43)** use for three days to organise **(44)** funeral.

Available to:

- **South African citizens**
- **Permanent** **(19)**
- **Between the ages of 18 and 75**
- **(20) have a bank account**

A Funeral Insurance Policy to Protect **(45)** Entire Family

- Partner – Add a small **(46)** to your monthly funeral insurance payment **(47)** cover your partner and/ or spouse for **(48)** to R75,000.
- Children (under the **(49)** of 21) – Our Family Funeral Benefit **(50)** a maximum of 5 children, up **(51)** R20,000. You can extend your funeral **(52)** to an additional 5 children, paying **(53)** separate amount for each extra child.

- ____(54)____ and partner's parents (under the age ____(55)____ 75) – For a small extra monthly ____(56)____, you can get funeral cover for ____(57)____ parents and partner's parents up to R20,000 ____(58)____.
- Get your payments back! If you ____(59)____ away, get all the funeral payments ____(60)____ were paid for your cover over ____(61)____ life of your policy paid out, ____(62)____ with your sum insured. Note that ____(63)____ only applies to the main insured ____(64)____ and their partner, and no payments ____(65)____ paid back on the death of ____(66)____ other insured life, or any riders ____(67)____ may have had. Policy fees and ____(68)____ provider benefit fees are also excluded ____(69)____ this benefit.

Extra Benefits You Can Add to ____(70)____ Funeral Insurance Policy

Monthly Provider

Cover ____(71)____ family's monthly expenses when you can ____(72)____ longer take care of them.

Our ____(73)____ Provider is an extra benefit that ____(74)____ can add on to your funeral ____(75)____ policy. It pays out up to R2000 ____(76)____ month if the insured person passes ____(77)____, so your family can use these 12 ____(78)____ instalments to pay for groceries or ____(79)____ other essential everyday expenses. This funeral ____(80)____ and your monthly payment increase by 7% ____(81)____ year.

Memorial Benefit

This benefit pays ____(82)____ up to R10,000 that you can ____(83)____ to cover costs for an unveiling ____(84)____, after the death of the insured ____(85)____ (or their partner). This benefit increases ____(86)____ 7% every year and your monthly ____(87)____ do too. Please note that the ____(88)____ of the funeral, monthly provider and ____(89)____ benefits cannot exceed R100,000 each for ____(90)____ main insured person and their insured ____(91)____.

Life Cover Benefit

Add life cover ____(92)____ you and your partner to your ____(93)____ funeral insurance policy for just a ____(94)____ extra monthly payment. You'll get paid ____(95)____ a lump sum of up to R120,000 ____(96)____ your death or that of your ____(97)____ partner. This benefit and your monthly ____(98)____ increase by 7% each year. The ____(99)____ age you can add this benefit ____(100)____ 18 and the maximum age is 65.

APPENDIX E: ETHICAL CLEARANCE LETTER



APPROVED WITH STIPULATIONS REC Humanities New Application Form

12 March 2018

Project number: GENL-2018-6171

Project title: The comprehensibility of plain language for second language speakers of English at a South African college of further education and training

Dear Mrs Sarah-Jane Coetze

Your REC Humanities New Application Form submitted on 27 February 2018 was reviewed by the REC: Humanities and approved with stipulations.

Ethics approval period:

Protocol approval date (Humanities)	Protocol expiration date (Humanities)
12 March 2018	11 March 2021

REC STIPULATIONS:

The researcher may proceed with the envisaged research provided that the following stipulations, relevant to the approval of the project are adhered to or addressed:

1. The researcher confirms that participants will be required to complete all questions in the cloze test. This must be communicated clearly in the consent form so that participants are aware (before they consent) that they will be expected to complete the survey in full and perhaps how long the survey will take to complete [RESPONSE REQUIRED]
2. The researcher did not explain how she will manage the data collected should a participant choose to withdraw. Please confirm whether participants can withdraw their participation (at any stage of the study?) and if they withdraw, what happens to their data / completed survey? [RESPONSE REQUIRED]
3. The researcher confirms that the consent forms will not be translated into IsiXhosa or Afrikaans. Since IsiXhosa and Afrikaans speaking students will be recruited to participate, it is not clear why the researcher will not offer these groups a consent form in their primary language? [RESPONSE REQUIRED]

HOW TO RESPOND:

Some of these stipulations may require your response. Where a response is required, you must respond to the REC within **six (6)** months of the date of this letter. Your approval would expire automatically should your response not be received by the REC within 6 months of the date of this letter.

Your response (and all changes requested) must be done directly on the electronic application form on the Infonetica system:<https://applyethics.sun.ac.za/Project/Index/6390>

Where revision to supporting documents is required, please ensure that you replace all outdated documents on your application form with the revised versions. Please respond to the stipulations in a separate cover letter titled "**Response to REC stipulations**" and attach the cover letter in the section **Additional Information and Documents**.

Please take note of the General Investigator Responsibilities attached to this letter. You may commence with your research after complying fully with these guidelines.

If the researcher deviates in any way from the proposal approved by the REC: Humanities, the researcher must notify the REC of these changes.

Please use your SU project number (GENL-2018-6171) on any documents or correspondence with the REC concerning your project.

Please note that the REC has the prerogative and authority to ask further questions, seek additional information, require further modifications, or monitor the conduct of your research and the consent process.

FOR CONTINUATION OF PROJECTS AFTER REC APPROVAL PERIOD

Please note that a progress report should be submitted to the Research Ethics Committee: Humanities before the approval period has expired if a continuation of ethics approval is required. The Committee will then consider the continuation of the project for a further year (if necessary).

Included Documents:

Document Type	File Name	Date	Version
Default	Research Request_approval from False Bay College	13/12/2017	1
Research Protocol/Proposal	Research proposal_SCoetzee_17475023_29022017	02/02/2018	1
Informed Consent Form	Consent form_17475023_SCoetzee.v2	02/02/2018	2
Data collection tool	Funeral cover cloze test.1	02/02/2018	1
Data collection tool	Language background	27/02/2018	1

If you have any questions or need further help, please contact the REC office at cgraham@sun.ac.za.

Sincerely,
Clarissa Graham

REC Coordinator: Research Ethics Committee: Human Research (Humanities)

*National Health Research Ethics Committee (NHREC) registration number: REC-050411-032.
The Research Ethics Committee: Humanities complies with the SA National Health Act No.61 2003 as it pertains to health research. In addition, this committee abides by the ethical norms and principles for research established by the Declaration of Helsinki (2013) and the Department of Health Guidelines for Ethical Research: Principles Structures and Processes (2nd Ed.) 2015. Annually a number of projects may be selected randomly for an external audit.*