

LEXICOLOGICAL CHALLENGES CONFRONTED BY STUDENTS MAJOR IN LEGAL ENGLISH

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
<p>Received: 14/01/2025</p> <p>Revised: 19/3/2025</p> <p>Published: 20/3/2025</p>	<p>Legal English is characterized by complex vocabulary, including derivational, semantic, and syntactic challenges, as well as the cultural and historical nuances embedded in legal terminology. This study investigated the challenges faced by legal English major students learning legal English, particularly focusing on legal lexicology. To explore these challenges, a mixed-methods approach was employed, combining 62 quantitative surveys and qualitative semi-structured interviews with 15 legal English majors at Hanoi Law University. The data were analyzed using IBM SPSS v.27 and ATLAS.ti v.25 software to assess comprehension, usage, and cultural influences on legal vocabulary. The findings revealed that the participants struggled with understanding specialized terminology, syntactic complexity, and the lack of direct translations between their native language and English legal terms. Besides, they also experienced difficulties in academic performance and lacked confidence in practical legal scenarios, but not much with the familiarity of Latin terms. The study concluded that targeted pedagogical strategies, such as analyzed glossaries, seminars, and syntax training, were necessary to bridge these gaps, and students would benefit from overcoming the inherent complexities of legal lexicology to better prepare them for academic and professional success in legal English.</p>
<p>KEYWORDS</p> <p>Lexicological challenges</p> <p>Legal English</p> <p>Derivational</p> <p>Cultural nuances</p> <p>Semantic and syntactic</p>	

THÁCH THỨC TỪ VỰNG: KHÓ KHĂN CỦA SINH VIÊN CHUYÊN NGÀNH TIẾNG ANH PHÁP LÝ

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<p>TỪ KHÓA</p> <p>Khó khăn từ vựng</p> <p>Tiếng Anh pháp lý</p> <p>Phái sinh từ</p> <p>Sắc thái văn hóa</p> <p>Ngữ nghĩa và cú pháp</p>	

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1. Introduction

In an increasingly globalized world, legal professionals are expected to master a specialized body of English that encompasses complex terminology, nuanced phraseology, and culturally embedded meanings [1]-[3]. For students studying legal English in a non-English speaking country, the acquisition of legal lexicon poses unique challenges that go beyond those encountered in more general English language learning [4], [5]. Legal lexicology - the study of legal vocabulary and its usage - is a foundational component of legal education that requires learners to navigate a landscape filled with arcane phrases - understood by only a few; e.g., *always with you, sis or you're never gonna give up on me, are you?* -, Latin terms; e.g., *de facto, vice versa, or et cetera (etc)*, and words bearing multiple, context-dependent meanings [1], [2], [6]. Such vocabulary often derives from centuries of legal tradition and is deeply intertwined with cultural and historical contexts that may be unfamiliar to English as a foreign language (EFL) learners. Students in an EFL country frequently encounter difficulties in grasping these subtleties, as their language learning journey must account for not only the semantics and syntax of legal terms but also their pragmatic applications in authentic legal settings [5], [7], [8]. Therefore, the significance of investigating these lexicological challenges lies in the pivotal role of language proficiency in shaping legal competence. Legal professionals must precisely interpret statutes, draft clear and enforceable contracts, and articulate arguments persuasively. Consequently, misunderstanding a term or using it inappropriately can lead to significant legal errors or miscommunication, which highlights the ability of legal English majors to overcome lexicological barriers directly influences their effectiveness in legal practice [9], [10]. In an EFL environment, where exposure to authentic legal English outside the classroom may be limited, these challenges are amplified, underscoring the need for targeted pedagogical strategies tailored to non-native speakers.

Legal vocabulary, particularly in English, is notorious for its complexity. This complexity arises from a combination of factors, including derivational, semantic, and syntactic challenges. Each category of complexity features distinct challenges for students acquiring legal English, together forming a significant obstacle to mastering legal language. Previous research [3], [9], [11] indicate that legal language often uses derivational processes to create new terms. The derived terminology may resemble their source forms but possess specific meanings within the legal context. For example, the verb "to insure" transforms into the noun "insurance," denoting a legally binding contract, and "govern" evolves into "government," a term with legal and political significance. They require not only an understanding of the root word but also the legal implications of the derived term. Moreover, many legal terms have meanings that are highly context-dependent and may vary significantly from their everyday usage. For instance, the term 'right' has a significantly different meaning in legal contexts compared to its common usage in everyday speech. In legal sense, a "right" may refer to a legally protected entitlement, such as a human right or a constitutional right, which has a specific legal standing that is not immediately apparent from the everyday meaning of the term. Similarly, the term contract refers to a formal, legally enforceable agreement, which may not be evident from the casual understanding of the word. Furthermore, legal language is also known for its complex sentence structures, which are often long, formal, and filled with embedded clauses. These syntactic structures are designed to ensure precision and clarity, but they can make legal texts difficult to read and interpret. Sentences in legal documents may include multiple subordinate clauses, passive constructions, and technical terms that add to the syntactic complexity. Al-Jarf [5] states that the gap between legalese - the sort of language used in legal documents that is difficult to understand - and plain English exacerbates these challenges. Legalese refers to the highly technical and formal language used in legal documents, which is often characterized by archaic terms - old and rarely used words, such as hence, whence, or hereafter, complex sentence structures, and an abundance of derived vocabulary. This specialized language can be difficult to understand for those not familiar with it, including students studying legal

English. Conversely, plain English is the language used in everyday communication, which is more direct, simple, and free from the jargon and formal constructions that dominate legal language. The gap between legalese and plain English creates difficulties for learners who are accustomed to the latter but must navigate the former in academic and professional legal circumstances.

As such, this research seeks to explore these challenges systematically, illuminating the specific obstacles that legal English majors face and providing insight into how these can be effectively addressed in an EFL context. To anchor the research, the following answers are posed as follows:

1. What are the predominant legal lexicological challenges faced by legal English majors in an EFL context?

2. How do these challenges affect their comprehension and production of legal language in both academic and practical settings?

By analyzing both quantitative data from surveys and qualitative insights from interviews with students, the study aimed to build a comprehensive picture of the challenges and to suggest evidence-based pedagogical interventions.

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Research design

The research was basically aimed to investigate a cross-sectional data of tertiary students majoring in legal English at Hanoi Law University, Viet Nam. This study employed a mixed-methods approach combining quantitative (researcher-made, five-point Likert scale surveys) and qualitative (semi-structured interviews) data collection to understand students' perceptions of legal vocabulary derivations. The participants included 62 students majoring in legal English at Hanoi Law University by taking part in the questionnaire survey and 15 other students partook the semi-structured interviews. Two sources of collected data were analyzed by IBM SPSS v.27 for the questionnaires and an ATLAS.ti v.25 application for transcribing the semi-structured interview responses.

2.2. Research instrument

The study used two kinds of the researcher-made instruments to ensure the conformity and reliability of the results. The researchers designed 40 statements categorized in five aspects with eight five-point Likert statements in the totality of 40 ones categorized into each group. These include comprehension of legal terminology, usage of legal terminology, cultural and linguistic challenges, legal lexical structures and syntax, and academic performance and study challenges. The questionnaire items were constructed according to attitudinal concepts proposed by Dörnyei and Dewaele [12]. Five other semi-structured interview items were imposed to ascertain the liability of the questionnaire items. These research instruments were sent to two linguistics experts for the content validation. After that, these research instruments were put into a pilot test with 15 volunteer students to ascertain the suitability of the research instruments. By scrutinizing the results, the researchers selected 25 questionnaire items, and 10 semi-structured interview statements with the good scales (0.71-0.91) of Cronbach's alpha [13]. Having prepared the research instruments properly, the researchers personally delivered to 205 legal English major students, then the collected printouts were screened for the correctness, and the final sample was involved in 62 participants. The computing applications, particularly IBM SPSS v.27 and ATLAS.ti v.25 were used to analyze the results.

2.3. Participants and procedures of data collection

This studied conducted at the faculty of English legal foreign languages at Hanoi Law University with 62 English major students, who provided insights into the demographic and motivational characteristics in a survey questionnaire. The participants were purposefully chosen

from the course 48 who had just finished the first basic legal English so that they could be able to compare and contrast between the plain and legal English. Besides, 15 students were voluntary to take part in semi-structured interviews. The students answered the printouts in person and the interviews were asked for allowance to be recorded. After all, the researchers screened the data to meet the requirement of the research, and the suitable data were addressed by the technological assistance. Among these participants, the majority were female (77.4%), with males accounting for only 22.6%. Regarding their residence, 72.6% lived in the city, while 21.0% resided in urban areas, and only a small proportion (6.4%) came from rural areas. Most students (82.3%) had studied English for 15 years, with a smaller group (17.7%) having learnt it for over 15 years. In terms of motivation, the majority (69.4%) displayed high motivation for learning, while 30.6% showed moderate motivation.

2.4. Data analysis

The data collected was organized, tabulated, analyzed, and interpreted using descriptive statistics. Specifically, frequency counts and percentages were utilized to present the profile of the respondents. Descriptive statistics were used to address five-point Likert-scale statements to determine means and standard deviations relevant to the interval scales such as strongly disagree/almost never (1.0 - 1.80), disagree/seldom (1.81 - 2.60), neutral/sometimes (2.61 - 3.40), agree/frequently (3.41 - 4.20), and strongly agree/always (4.21 - 5.0). Besides, the study tested whether there was a difference between the gender with those features of legal terminology. To ensure the reliability of the qualitative data, the NVivo v.12 application was utilized to analyze the frequency of occurrence of respondents' perspectives in the semi-structured interviews.

3. Results and Discussion

The table presented data analyzing the comprehension of legal terminology among 62 participants. The mean scores for all statements ranged between 3.94 and 4.06, indicating a general agreement among respondents that they experienced difficulty with legal terminology. The highest mean (4.06) related to feeling overwhelmed by the volume of new legal vocabulary encountered, suggesting this was the most prominent challenge. The lowest mean (3.94) pertained to confusion with similar-sounding legal terms, although it still denoted a considerable level of agreement. The standard deviations ranged from 0.442 to 0.885, showing varying levels of consensus, with the least variability in responses regarding the struggle with polysemous words (SD = 0.442) - words that have a number of related senses are polysemous; e.g., *paper* refers to both a substance and a publication printed on that substance, and the most variability in confusion over similar-sounding terms (SD = 0.885). Hence, the data underscores the multifaceted nature of challenges faced by students or practitioners when engaging with legal terminology. The combination of high mean scores and varying levels of response consistency points to a pervasive difficulty. This indicates both technical and contextual scenes, requiring targeted interventions such as specialized training, glossaries, or workshops to enhance comprehension and reduce the cognitive load of legal studies.

Regarding the respondents' challenges and confidence levels in using legal terminology, the mean values across the items ranged from 3.80 to 4.11, with relatively low standard deviations (ranging from 0.731 to 0.849), indicating consistent responses. The participants acknowledged struggling with the incorrect use of legal terms (M = 3.90) and recalling appropriate legal vocabulary (M = 3.92). There was confidence expressed in using Latin legal terms (M = 4.11), suggesting familiarity or comfort with this specific aspect of legal language. However, difficulties persisted with formal or archaic language (M = 3.80) and the need for feedback or assistance with legal terminology (M = 3.97), highlighting areas for improvement. Thus, while the respondents express their confidence in specific areas like Latin terms, the broader challenges with using and recalling appropriate legal vocabulary and seeking external help reveal a clear need for further training and support in mastering legal terminology. This finding is somehow reflected in the

previous studies [1], [2], [7], who assert that the meaning of legal English is a big challenge for students to deal with.

Concerning cultural and linguistic challenges in understanding legal English, the students strongly agreed that their native language influenced their understanding of legal English terms ($M = 4.11$; $SD = 0.851$) and that the translation of legal texts from English to their native language was commonly unclear or inaccurate ($M = 4.13$; $SD = 0.757$). These high mean values suggested significant challenges stemming from linguistic and cultural factors. However, responses were more neutral when considering the lack of direct translation between native and legal English terms ($M = 2.92$; $SD = 0.855$) and the challenge of relating English legal terminology to their country's legal practices ($M = 2.95$; $SD = 0.798$). These neutral responses might indicate that these specific issues were less prominent or varied among individuals. Additionally, there was agreement that native language legal vocabulary lacked equivalents for many English legal terms ($M = 3.69$; $SD = 0.781$), highlighting gaps in linguistic alignment between systems. The results underscore the profound impact of cultural and linguistic factors on the understanding and usage of legal English. While some issues, such as unclear translations and vocabulary mismatches, are widely recognized, other challenges like direct translation and contextual alignment with native legal systems appear to be less consistent across the respondents. This outcome is found adverse in the previous studies [3], [4], who claim that their students report to experience less with those challenges.

The legal lexical structures and syntax highlighted how these elements impacted the comprehension of legal English. The respondents agreed that the use of passive voice in legal writing complicated understanding ($M = 3.75$; $SD = 0.618$) and that the length and complexity of legal sentences often hindered comprehension ($M = 3.85$; $SD = 0.818$). These high mean values indicated that sentence structure was a significant barrier. Additionally, the participants stated that they had trouble identifying the subject and predicate in legal English sentences ($M = 3.59$; $SD = 0.756$) and found it difficult to follow syntactical patterns commonly used in legal writing ($M = 3.50$; $SD = 0.504$). However, the complexity of sentence structures in legal texts received a neutral interpretation ($M = 2.52$; $SD = 0.504$), suggesting this issue was less prominent or varied more among individuals. As such, the results suggest that while general sentence complexity may not universally hinder understanding, specific features of legal syntax, such as passive voice, long sentences, and unfamiliar grammatical patterns, present considerable challenges for respondents. These outcomes are not in line with some previous studies [7], [9], [11] in that sentence complexity causes no difficulty for learners.

When considering academic performance and study challenges, the respondents strongly agreed that legal terminology negatively affected their academic performance ($M = 4.11$; $SD = 0.791$), indicating that it was a critical barrier to success. Similarly, there was agreement that a lack of proficiency in legal English terminology led to seeking additional help or tutoring ($M = 3.61$; $SD = 0.491$) and that improving their legal lexicon would enhance academic performance ($M = 3.87$; $SD = 0.799$). Challenges in interpreting legal case law in English received agreement ($M = 3.53$; $SD = 0.503$), further emphasizing the struggles with comprehension. However, writing legal essays or research papers in English due to lexical challenges was rated neutrally ($M = 3.08$; $SD = 0.911$), indicating this issue might not be as universally challenging as the others. Therefore, while some aspects of legal English, such as essay writing, may not universally hinder academic performance, terminology proficiency and case law interpretation are substantial barriers for many. Addressing these challenges through enhanced legal English training and resources could significantly improve both academic outcomes and confidence in navigating complex legal texts. This finding is consistent with Tran and Nguyen [11].

Table 1. *The aspects influencing the complexity of legal lexicological derivations*

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Interpretation
<i>Comprehension of legal terminology</i>				
I find it difficult to understand specialized legal terms in English.	62	3.98	0.665	Agreement
I often struggle with the meaning of polysemous words in legal texts.	62	4.03	0.442	Agreement
I frequently misunderstand the meaning of Latin phrases used in legal documents.	62	4.00	0.573	Agreement
I sometimes confuse similar-sounding legal terms with different meanings.	62	3.94	0.885	Agreement
I feel overwhelmed by the amount of new legal vocabulary I encounter in my studies.	62	4.06	0.772	Agreement
<i>Usage of legal terminology</i>				
I often use legal terms incorrectly in my writing or speaking.	62	3.90	0.762	Agreement
When discussing legal topics, I struggle to recall appropriate legal vocabulary.	62	3.92	0.731	Agreement
I feel confident using Latin legal terms when communicating in English.	62	4.11	0.770	Agreement
I have difficulty using formal or archaic legal language in English.	62	3.80	0.783	Agreement
I often need assistance or feedback on the accuracy of the legal terms I use in my work.	62	3.97	0.849	Agreement
<i>Cultural and linguistic challenges</i>				
My native language influences my understanding of legal English terms.	62	4.11	0.851	Agreement
The lack of direct translation between my native language and legal English causes confusion.	62	2.92	0.855	Neutral
I find it challenging to relate legal terminology to my country's legal practices.	62	2.95	0.798	Neutral
My native language's legal vocabulary does not have equivalents for many English legal terms.	62	3.69	0.781	Agreement
The translation of legal texts from English to my native language is often unclear or inaccurate.	62	4.13	0.757	Agreement
<i>Legal lexical structures and syntax</i>				
The complexity of sentence structures in legal texts makes it harder to understand legal English.	62	2.52	0.504	Neutral
I find it difficult to follow the syntactical patterns commonly used in legal writing.	62	3.50	0.504	Agreement
The use of passive voice in legal writing complicates my understanding of legal texts.	62	3.75	0.618	Agreement
The length and complexity of legal sentences often make it difficult for me to grasp their meaning.	62	3.85	0.818	Agreement
I have trouble identifying the subject and predicate in legal English sentences.	62	3.59	0.756	Agreement
<i>Academic performance and study challenges</i>				
Legal English terminology often affects my academic performance negatively.	62	4.11	0.791	Agreement
I find it difficult to write legal essays or research papers in English due to lexical challenges.	62	3.08	0.911	Neutral
I frequently struggle with interpreting legal case law in English.	62	3.53	0.503	Agreement
My lack of proficiency in Legal English terminology has caused me to seek extra help or tutoring.	62	3.61	0.491	Agreement
I feel that improving my legal lexicon would greatly improve my academic performance.	62	3.87	0.799	Agreement
Valid N (listwise)	62			

Table 2 indicated the comparison between gender and factors affecting legal lexicological derivations relating to potential disparities in understanding and usage of legal language. The factor "Comprehension of legal terminology" showed no significant variance ($p = 0.486$) or mean difference ($p = 0.097$), meaning that gender did not substantially influence individuals' ability to comprehend legal terms. Similarly, for "Usage of legal terminology," the results revealed no significant variance ($p = 0.435$) or mean difference ($p = 0.460$), implying that both genders

exhibited comparable proficiency in employing legal terms. "Cultural and linguistic challenges," another critical factor, presented no significant gender-based differences in variance ($p = 0.617$) or mean scores ($p = 0.102$). However, the factor "Legal lexical structures and syntax" stood out as an exception. While variances were not greatly different ($p = 0.149$), the t-test under unequal variances identified a significant mean difference ($p = 0.047$), indicating that gender might play a role in this specific aspect of legal lexicology, potentially reflecting disparities in how males and females process or construct legal syntax and lexical structures. Lastly, "Academic performance and study challenges" yielded no significant results in either variances ($p = 0.991$) or means ($p = 0.188$), further supporting the notion that gender did not widely influence this dimension. Thus, Table 2 demonstrates that while most factors affecting legal lexicological derivations do not show significant gender differences, the exception of "Legal lexical structures and syntax" signify the importance of understanding how gender dynamics may uniquely affect certain advanced aspects of legal language. It further poses a potential area for targeted support or research to ensure equity in legal education and practice.

Table 2. Comparison between gender and factors affecting legal lexicological derivations

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means				
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference
Comprehension of legal terminology	Equal variances assumed	0.492	.486	-1.687	60	.097	-.68452	.40588
	Equal variances not assumed			-1.941	26.99	.063	-.68452	.35262
Usage of legal terminology	Equal variances assumed	0.617	.435	-.744	60	.460	-.43452	.58378
	Equal variances not assumed			-.670	18.51	.511	-.43452	.64813
Cultural and linguistic challenges	Equal variances assumed	0.253	.617	-1.662	60	.102	-.89583	.53907
	Equal variances not assumed			-1.747	22.88	.094	-.89583	.51292
Legal lexical structures and syntax	Equal variances assumed	2.134	.149	1.642	60	.106	.66369	.40410
	Equal variances not assumed			2.061	32.62	.047	.66369	.32205
Academic performance and study challenges	Equal variances assumed	0.000	.991	-1.323	124	.188	-.719	.544
	Equal variances not assumed			-1.365	45.68	.179	-.719	.527

As summarized in Table 3 relating to the recordings of the semi-structured interviews with 15 participants, the results revealed that the challenges that the students confronted when learning legal English, particularly with archaic and Latin terminology, were multifaceted and rooted in both linguistic and contextual factors. Many participants struggled with the understanding of archaic and Latin terms because these elements of legal language often had meanings that differed significantly from their everyday usage or were no longer in common use. For non-native English speakers, this issue was compounded by the influence of their native language and cultural background, which might not have direct equivalents for these terms. As a result, the respondents often found themselves attempting to translate complex legal terms and phrases into their own language, leading to confusion or misinterpretation. Furthermore, the highly specialized jargon and formal expressions used in legal English presented an additional challenge. Legal English is characterized by precise and formal language, which, while essential for legal clarity, can be difficult to master, particularly for students unfamiliar with the conventions of legal writing and

communication. Terms that may seem straightforward to a legal professional can appear convoluted or overly technical to a learner. For instance, terms like “habeas corpus” or “nolo contendere” may seem obscure and challenging to both understand and apply. This difficulty is particularly evident in practical scenarios, such as writing legal essays, presenting cases, or engaging in legal discussions. The English legal students somehow expressed a lack of confidence when it came to using legal terminology in these settings. Their fear of misusing terms or failing to apply them correctly in real-world contexts could hinder their ability to engage effectively with the material. This lack of confidence, along with the unfamiliarity with specific legal expressions, creates the broader challenge of mastering legal English, which requires not just theoretical understanding but also practical application in professional contexts. As such, the participants confront a complex set of obstacles that demand both linguistic skill and cultural awareness to succeed in acquiring legal English.

Table 3. *The summary report of semi-structured interviews (ATLAS.ti v.25)*

	N	Freq.	Percent
Understanding legal terminology in English	15	13	86.7
Cultural and linguistic influences of legal English	15	11	73.3
Legal jargon and ambiguity	15	14	93.3
Latin and archaic terms in in academic readings or practice	15	13	86.7
Applying legal terminology in practical scenarios	15	12	80.0
Valid N (listwise)	15		

4. Conclusion

The study investigated the significant challenges faced by EFL learners in mastering legal English vocabulary, which directly addressed the inherent complexities of legal lexicology. The English major students learning legal English in a non-native context struggle with derivational, semantic, and syntactic barriers, alongside the cultural and historical nuances embedded in legal terminology. The findings reveal that technical terms like “right” and “contract” pose interpretative difficulties due to their specialized legal meanings, while archaic and Latin phrases, as well as the syntactical complexity of legal texts, create additional obstacles. These challenges are amplified in an EFL context, where students have limited exposure to authentic legal discourse outside the classroom, exacerbating their difficulties in both academic and practical settings. In addition, the results highlight that the overwhelming volume of legal vocabulary, the lack of meaning equivalence between native and English legal terms, and the pervasive influence of native language contribute to confusion and misinterpretation. Furthermore, students’ struggles with passive constructions, long sentences, and formal legal structures hinder their comprehension and application of legal texts. This not only impacts their academic performance but also diminishes their confidence in professional legal communication, particularly when dealing with legal case law, essay writing, and discussions. Thus, addressing these challenges requires evidence-based pedagogical interventions tailored to EFL learners. Strategies such as incorporating analyzed glossaries, conducting seminars or workshops on legal terminology, and providing targeted feedback on syntax and derivational complexities can enhance students' understanding and application of legal English. The finding emphasizes that bridging the gap between Legalese and plain English is also essential, as it equips students with the skills to interpret and produce legal texts effectively. Ultimately, the research highlights the need for a holistic approach in legal English education that integrates linguistic, cultural, and contextual considerations. Such efforts can empower students to navigate the complexities of legal language, ensuring they are well-prepared for the demands of both academic and professional legal environments.

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