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THE CHALLENGE OF LEGAL TERMINOLOGY IN TEACHING LEGAL ENGLISH TO NON-NATIVE SPEAKERS

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Abstract. As legal education and professional practice become increasingly international, Legal English has taken on greater importance for students and professionals whose first language is not English. One of the most persistent difficulties in teaching Legal English is specialized terminology. Legal terms are not simply technical words that can be learned through memorization. Their meanings are often shaped by particular legal systems, historical traditions, professional conventions, and contexts of use. This article explores the main difficulties non-native speakers face when learning English legal terminology and considers teaching approaches that may help address them. The study is based on a qualitative review of research in Legal English, English for Specific Purposes, legal translation, corpus linguistics, and comparative law. Four recurring challenges emerge from the literature: the lack of direct equivalents between legal systems, polysemy and context-sensitive meaning, interference from learners' first languages and domestic legal concepts, and the gap between recognizing a legal term and being able to use it accurately in professional communication. The discussion suggests that terminology is learned more effectively when it is introduced through authentic contexts, connected to legal concepts, compared across legal systems, and recycled through reading, writing, speaking, and problem-solving activities. Corpus-informed instruction, selective use of the learners' first language, and collaboration between language teachers and legal specialists can also strengthen the learning process. The article argues that Legal English terminology teaching should move beyond vocabulary memorization and aim instead at developing legal, conceptual, and communicative competence.

Keywords: Legal English; legal terminology; English for Specific Purposes; non-native speakers; legal education; vocabulary acquisition; legal discourse; comparative law; corpus-based teaching

Introduction. English now plays a central role in international legal communication. It is widely used in higher education, commercial transactions, arbitration, diplomacy, international organizations, and cross-border legal practice. For this reason, law students in countries where English is not the main language are increasingly expected to read legal texts, discuss legal issues, conduct research, and communicate professionally in English. Legal English has therefore become an important area within English for Specific Purposes.

Yet teaching Legal English is not simply a matter of adding legal vocabulary to a general English course. Legal language has its own conventions, structures, and traditions. It often contains highly specialized terminology, established phraseology, complex syntax, historically rooted expressions, and ordinary words that take on very specific meanings in legal contexts.

For non-native speakers, this creates a particular difficulty. Learners are often required to understand both a new English expression and a new legal concept at the same time. The word consideration is a useful example. A learner may already know its everyday meaning, but in contract law the term refers to a specific legal concept associated with the enforceability of promises in common-law systems. Familiarity with the general meaning therefore does not necessarily help the learner understand its legal use.

The challenge becomes greater when a learner comes from a legal system in which the corresponding legal institution either does not exist or is structured differently. Terms such as equity, trust, tort, consideration, and estoppel are closely connected with the common-law tradition. Translating these terms into another language may give the learner an approximate equivalent, but it does not automatically provide an accurate understanding of the underlying concept.

This is especially important in civil-law contexts. When teaching materials are based mainly on common-law concepts without sufficient comparison with the learners' domestic legal system, students may struggle not only with vocabulary but also with legal meaning. Research in the Uzbek context has likewise drawn attention to terminological non-equivalence, semantic ambiguity, multilingual interference, and differences between legal traditions.

The real problem, then, is not simply how many legal words learners can remember. What matters is whether they understand what those words refer to, how their meanings change from one context to another, and how they are actually used in professional legal discourse.

Against this background, the present study addresses four questions:

1. What linguistic and conceptual features make English legal terminology difficult for non-native speakers?
2. How do differences between legal systems influence the learning of Legal English terminology?
3. Which teaching strategies are most useful for presenting and practising specialized legal vocabulary?
4. How can Legal English teaching help learners move from recognizing terms to using them confidently and accurately?

The article argues that effective terminology teaching requires more than vocabulary explanation. It should combine language instruction with legal conceptualization, comparison across legal systems, authentic discourse, and repeated opportunities to use terminology in meaningful contexts.

Methodology. This study uses a qualitative literature-based research design supported by thematic and document analysis. Rather than reporting the results of a classroom experiment, it brings together findings from studies in Legal English, English for Legal Purposes, ESP vocabulary teaching, legal translation, corpus linguistics, and comparative legal terminology. A literature-based approach was considered appropriate because the purpose of the study is to identify recurring difficulties in the teaching of legal terminology and to examine the pedagogical solutions that have been proposed in previous research.

The sources used literature included in the analysis were selected according to several criteria. First, they had to deal directly with Legal English, legal terminology, English for Legal Purposes, specialized vocabulary instruction, or legal translation. Second, priority was given to studies involving non-native speakers or educational settings in which English is taught as a foreign or additional language.

Studies on corpus-based learning, legal-system equivalence, vocabulary acquisition, and the pedagogical role of the learners' first language were also included because of their relevance to terminology teaching. Both foundational studies and more recent empirical research were considered so that the discussion could combine established theoretical perspectives with contemporary classroom practice.

Particular attention was paid to research on the complexity of legal language, technical vocabulary, corpus-informed instruction, cross-cultural terminology learning, and cooperation between language teachers and legal specialists. Northcott and Brown (2006), for example, emphasize the importance of collaboration between English-for-legal-purposes teachers and subject specialists when dealing with complex terminology. Corpus-based research has similarly

shown that legal vocabulary can be identified systematically and incorporated into teaching materials rather than selected only on the basis of intuition.

The literature was examined thematically. Four recurring areas of difficulty were identified:

- legal-system-specific terminology and conceptual non-equivalence;
- polysemy and context-sensitive meaning;
- first-language and legal-system interference;
- the difference between receptive and productive knowledge of terminology.

The teaching strategies discussed in the literature were then considered in relation to these challenges. They included contextualized instruction, comparative-law analysis, corpus-based learning, conceptual mapping, strategic first-language support, authentic materials, lexical bundles, and collaboration with legal professionals.

The findings presented in the following sections should therefore be understood as a synthesis of patterns found in previous scholarship rather than as statistical findings from a new experimental study.

Results and Discussion. One of the clearest conclusions to emerge from the literature is that difficulty with Legal English terminology cannot be explained simply as a vocabulary problem. In general language learning, students can often connect a new English word with a concept they already know in their first language. With legal terminology, this is not always possible. A learner may need to understand a new word and a new legal category at the same time.

The term tort illustrates this difficulty well. A dictionary may offer an approximate translation such as “civil wrong,” but this does not provide a full understanding of the concept. Learners also need to see how tort law relates to negligence, duty of care, damages, causation, and liability within the common-law system. The same is true of terms such as trust, equity, consideration, estoppel, injunction, precedent, and common law. These words do not function independently. Each belongs to a broader network of legal ideas. When they are taught as isolated vocabulary items, learners may remember a definition without actually understanding the concept. This point is especially relevant for students from civil-law jurisdictions. Legal systems do not always categorize legal reality in the same way. A term that looks equivalent in translation may differ in scope, legal function, procedural use, or historical development. For that reason, Legal English teaching should ideally follow a sequence such as:

legal term → legal concept → legal context → legal function rather than stopping at: English term → translated equivalent

This distinction is important because it helps prevent learners from assuming that two terms are identical simply because a bilingual dictionary presents them as equivalents. A major difficulty in Legal English teaching arises from the fact that legal terminology is closely tied to legal institutions, and those institutions vary from one jurisdiction to another.

Much of Legal English has developed within the common-law tradition. Students from countries based mainly on civil-law systems therefore encounter concepts that may not have an exact counterpart in their own legal environment. The term trust, for example, cannot be fully understood through translation alone. Its meaning depends on the specific relationship between legal and beneficial interests found in common law. Similarly, equity should not be presented merely as another word for fairness, because in the common-law tradition it refers to a historically developed body of principles and remedies.

Research in the Uzbek context has also shown that terms such as consideration, trust, and equity can be particularly difficult because no straightforward domestic equivalent may exist. For teaching purposes, it is useful to distinguish among three broad relationships between legal terms: 1. Direct or near equivalence exists when similar concepts operate in both legal systems. 2. Partial equivalence occurs when two institutions serve related purposes but differ in scope, procedure, or

legal consequences. 3. System-bound terminology refers to terms that represent legal institutions for which no true equivalent exists in the learner's legal system. Helping students recognize these differences is more useful than simply providing translations.

A comparative legal map can be particularly effective. The teacher can introduce an English term, explain its meaning and function, identify the closest domestic concept, and then discuss the main differences. For example:

Term	Simplified concept	Comparative issue
consideration	something of legal value exchanged in relation to a contractual promise	no exact equivalent in many civil-law systems
tort	a category of civil wrong giving rise to liability	classification differs across legal systems
equity	historically developed principles supplementing common law	should not be reduced to ordinary "fairness"
trust	a legal arrangement in which property is held for another's benefit	may have no structurally identical equivalent

Used in this way, translation becomes the beginning of analysis rather than the end of it. Polysemy and Context-Dependent Meaning is really important. Another difficulty is that many legal terms are not unfamiliar words at all. They are ordinary English words used in specialized ways. Examples include: action, appeal, case, charge, claim, consideration, damages, execution, instrument, issue, motion, party, and remedy.A learner may already know party as a social event or a political organization. In legal discourse, however, the term can refer to a person or organization involved in a lawsuit, contract, or other legal relationship. The term damages may also be misleading. Outside legal contexts, students may associate it with physical harm. In law, however, it often refers to financial compensation awarded for loss or injury. Likewise, charge may refer to a criminal accusation, an amount of money, or an interest affecting property, depending on the context and jurisdiction.

This is one reason dictionary-based memorization often fails. Bancroft-Billings (2020) shows that technical legal vocabulary is strongly dependent on context, which supports the need to teach terminology through authentic legal discourse rather than as isolated definitions.

Instead of asking only: "What does appeal mean?"

a teacher might present examples such as: The defendant appealed against the conviction. The appeal was dismissed. - The Court of Appeal upheld the original judgment. Students can then examine how the term behaves grammatically, which words commonly appear with it, who performs the action, and what legal consequences may follow.

For the same reason, legal terminology should be taught together with collocations and phraseology. Learners need to become familiar with expressions such as:

bring an action
file a claim
award damages
breach a contract
enter into a contract
impose a sentence
grant an injunction
reach a settlement
plead guilty
deliver a judgment

In professional communication, these combinations are often more important than knowledge of individual words.

Corpus-based research is particularly useful here because it allows learners to observe how legal terms actually behave in authentic texts. Studies using specialized corpora and data-driven learning suggest that such resources can help Legal English learners use terminology more accurately and consistently. First-language interference and false equivalence matter a lot. The learner's first language can be both helpful and problematic in Legal English instruction. Using the first language is not in itself a weakness. Translation and comparison can help students grasp difficult concepts. The problem appears when learners assume that a translated term must have exactly the same legal meaning as the English term. This can lead to false equivalence.

A student may transfer the meaning, grammatical behavior, or professional usage of a domestic legal term directly into English. The risk is even greater in multilingual

environments, where students may be working through two or more languages before reaching the English concept.

At the same time, excluding the first language completely may not be helpful either. A 2024 study conducted at a Vietnamese university found that teachers and students generally viewed carefully controlled use of the mother tongue positively when learning Legal English terminology. The first language can support conceptual understanding when it is used strategically rather than as a replacement for English practice.

The key question is therefore not whether translation should be used, but how. A teacher might begin with: "What is the closest equivalent in your legal system?", but should continue with questions such as: "Does the domestic term have exactly the same legal meaning?", "What are the differences?", "In which contexts is the English term used?", "Could the translation be misleading?" Questions of this kind encourage students to think comparatively and help them develop both linguistic precision and legal awareness.

Another important distinction is the difference between receptive and productive knowledge. A learner may correctly match: plaintiff — a person who brings a civil action in a vocabulary exercise and still be unable to use the term naturally in a sentence such as: The plaintiff sought damages for breach of contract.

The learner may also have difficulty distinguishing plaintiff from related terms such as claimant, applicant, petitioner, prosecutor, or complainant. All of these refer to participants in legal proceedings, but they are not interchangeable. This suggests that traditional vocabulary tests may sometimes give an overly optimistic picture of students' actual ability. Legal terminology can be assessed at several levels:

Recognition: Can the learner identify the term?

Definition: Can the learner explain what it means?

Conceptual distinction: Can the learner distinguish it from related legal terms?

Contextual interpretation: Can the learner understand the term in a legal text?

Collocational competence: Can the learner combine it naturally with other legal expressions?

Productive use: Can the learner use it correctly in speaking or writing?

Professional application: Can the learner apply the term appropriately when solving a legal problem? Seen in this way, terminology learning is a gradual process that should move from recognition to meaningful professional use.

The value of authentic materials must be considered. The literature consistently supports the use of contextualized learning. Legal terminology is more meaningful when students encounter it in authentic or realistic materials such as: contracts, statutes, court judgments, legal correspondence, case summaries, international treaties, legal opinions, client interviews, and professional forms.

Authentic materials show learners how terminology operates within real legal discourse. However, authentic texts are not automatically effective teaching materials. Giving students a

difficult court judgment with no preparation can easily create frustration rather than learning. The text needs to be scaffolded.

A teacher working with a judgment might, for example:

1. introduce the factual and legal background;
2. pre-teach a small number of essential terms;
3. ask students to locate those terms in the text;
4. examine their collocations and grammatical patterns;
5. compare them with related legal concepts;
6. ask students to summarize the decision;
7. recycle the vocabulary in a speaking or writing task.

This type of sequencing turns a difficult legal document into a useful learning resource. Legal texts can also place considerable cognitive demands on learners because of dense noun phrases, embedded clauses, and highly formal structures. For this reason, terminology should not be separated from the grammatical and discourse patterns in which it usually appears.

Legal terminology is also easier to understand when vocabulary is organized into meaningful groups rather than presented as unrelated lists. A lesson on criminal procedure, for example, might be organized in the following way:

Offence: crime, offence, felony, misdemeanor
Persons: suspect, accused, defendant, prosecutor, witness
Procedure: arrest, charge, arraignment, trial, conviction, acquittal
Evidence: testimony, exhibit, admissibility, burden of proof
Outcome: verdict, sentence, imprisonment, fine, appeal

This type of organization allows students to see how the terms relate to one another and to reconstruct the stages of a legal process.

The same approach can be used in contract law: offer → acceptance → consideration → agreement → obligation → performance → breach → remedy → damages

Such conceptual networks reflect the way legal ideas are connected in practice. They also make it easier to combine terminology learning with case analysis and problem-solving.

Legal English sits at the intersection of language and law, and this creates another practical challenge. Cooperation between language teachers and legal specialists is needed. A language teacher may have strong expertise in vocabulary teaching, grammar, discourse, and pedagogy but limited formal legal training. A law lecturer, by contrast, may understand legal concepts in depth but have little experience insecond-language teaching. For this reason, interdisciplinary cooperation can be highly valuable. Northcott and Brown (2006) show how collaboration between English-for-legal-purposes teachers and legal specialists can help address difficult terminological issues in professional training. Such cooperation might involve: joint curriculum design; legal review of teaching materials; guest lectures by legal specialists; participation of language teachers in law classes; development of comparative or bilingual glossaries; joint creation of case-based activities. This type of collaboration helps reduce the risk of giving explanations that are linguistically clear but legally inaccurate.

Conclusion. Legal terminology remains one of the most demanding areas of Legal English instruction for non-native speakers. The difficulty lies not simply in the number of unfamiliar words learners encounter, but in the fact that legal terms carry conceptual, institutional, historical, and jurisdiction-specific meanings.

The discussion in this article has highlighted four major challenges: lack of direct equivalence between legal systems, polysemy and context-sensitive meaning, interference from the learners' first language and domestic legal framework, and the difference between recognizing terminology and using it effectively.

These challenges reveal the limitations of vocabulary teaching based mainly on word lists, definitions, and translation. Such techniques may be useful as a starting point, but they are not enough to develop the type of terminological competence learners need for academic study or professional legal communication.

Legal terminology is more likely to be learned successfully when words are connected with the concepts they represent and presented in meaningful contexts. Comparative analysis can help students avoid false equivalence between legal systems. Authentic documents and case-based activities can show how terminology functions in professional discourse, while corpus resources can reveal common collocations, lexical bundles, and patterns of use.

The learners' first language should not necessarily be excluded from the classroom. When used carefully, it can help clarify complex legal concepts and encourage useful comparisons between legal systems. At the same time, students should be encouraged to move beyond translation and develop the ability to think about legal meaning directly through English.

Closer cooperation between language teachers and legal specialists may further strengthen Legal English teaching. Because the subject lies between two disciplines, both linguistic and legal expertise are needed if students are to receive explanations that are both accessible and accurate.

Ultimately, the aim of Legal English teaching should not be to produce students who can memorize or translate long lists of terminology. It should be to help learners understand legal concepts, recognize differences between jurisdictions, interpret terminology in context, and use specialized language confidently and appropriately in reading, writing, speaking, and professional problem-solving.

Future research could test the proposed teaching cycle in actual Legal English classrooms and compare the effectiveness of translation-based, corpus-based, and case-based approaches. Studies involving learners from different legal traditions would also provide a clearer picture of how domestic legal systems influence the acquisition of English legal terminology.

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