Lexical Challenges in Learning Legal English: A Case Study of LLB Students at MANUU

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Abstract

Legal English constitutes a specialized linguistic register distinguished by its formal style, precise terminology, frequent use of Latin expressions, and retention of archaic structures. For law students whose first language is not English, particularly those educated in non-English-medium contexts, the acquisition of this vocabulary presents notable cognitive and linguistic challenges. This study investigates the lexical difficulties encountered by LLB students at Maulana Azad National Urdu University (MANUU), examining how limited lexical competence affects their reading comprehension, academic writing, and overall engagement with legal discourse. Adopting a mixed-methods design, data were collected through a vocabulary test, focus group discussions, and analysis of students' written assignments. The findings reveal that a significant proportion of participants face persistent challenges in both understanding and accurately applying essential legal terminology. Contributing factors include first-language interference, minimal exposure to authentic legal texts, and a reliance on rote memorization strategies. The paper concludes with pedagogical recommendations for enhancing legal vocabulary instruction in law programs catering to non-native English speakers.

1. Introduction

Language is foundational to legal education, not only as a medium of instruction but also as the central mechanism for expressing legal reasoning, argumentation, and interpretation. Among the many registers of professional English, Legal English stands out for its complexity, marked by technical vocabulary, formal syntax, Latin terms, and archaic constructions that can diverge significantly from general English. These linguistic features pose unique challenges for learners, especially those from non-English-medium backgrounds.

While ESP fields such as medicine and business have attracted attention in educational research, legal education has traditionally focused more on doctrinal content than linguistic preparation. Legal vocabulary often involves semantic shifts, everyday words like *consideration*, *party*, and *charge* take on specialized legal meanings; Latin expressions such as *res judicata*, *prima facie*, and *mens rea* frequently appear yet are seldom explained explicitly in classroom. This gap in vocabulary instruction affects comprehension, academic writing, and participation in professional discourse.

The situation is especially pronounced in the Indian legal education system, where English remains the dominant medium of instruction even in institutions serving students from regional language backgrounds.

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Maulana Azad National Urdu University (MANUU) exemplifies this dynamic: its LLB students—primarily educated in Urdu—often enter law programs with limited exposure to both academic English and the specialized register of Legal English. This linguistic barrier impairs their ability to engage effectively with textbooks, court judgments, moot court exercises, and written exams, and may undermine their confidence and future career prospects.

Observation and preliminary feedback from students at MANUU indicate persistent struggles with key legal terms embedded in conceptual understanding. Vocabulary is often memorized without context, and students lean on translation, rote learning, or peer assistance to navigate legal texts—short-term coping strategies that do not foster lasting lexical competence or analytical skill.

Empirical research on Legal English learning in non-Anglophone contexts supports these observations (Nuoc, 2022; Williams, 2004; Bhatia, 1993; Tiersma, 1999). A survey-based study at Hanoi Law University found that students identified features like Latin terms, archaic vocabulary, and legalese-specific semantics as the most challenging in their Legal English coursework (Bhatia, 2018) Similarly, the broader Indian context—including the colonial legacy that entrenched English in legal systems—underlines the continuing gap between access to legal education and mastery of its linguistic demand (Krishnam, 2024).

Currently, there is a scarcity of focused research addressing Legal English learning among Indian LLB students educated in vernacular mediums. To bridge this gap, this study focuses specifically on Urdu-medium LLB learners at MANUU, using a mixed-methods approach—combining vocabulary testing, focus group discussions, and written assignment analysis—to explore the lexical challenges these students encounter and the coping strategies they employ. This triangulated methodology aims to yield a nuanced understanding of how legal vocabulary competence affects educational outcomes and to inform pedagogical recommendations for enhancing Legal English learning in similar contexts. To address these concerns, this study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What specific lexical challenges do the MANUU law students face while learning Legal English?
2. What pedagogical strategies can be implemented to enhance vocabulary development in Legal English for linguistically diverse classrooms?
3. What patterns of lexical errors are evident in their legal writing?

2. Literature Review

The study of Legal English as a branch of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) has evolved significantly over the past few decades. Scholars have increasingly recognized that legal language is not merely a stylistic variation of general English but a distinct linguistic register that requires specialized instruction. This recognition has led to a growing body of research that explores the lexical, syntactic, and discourse features of legal English, along with the pedagogical challenges involved in teaching it to non-native learners, especially those from linguistically diverse or vernacular-medium backgrounds.

2.1. Legal English as a Specialized Register

Legal English is often described as a sublanguage—a technical variety of language used within a specific profession (Crystal & Davy, 1969; Gibbons, 2003). It is characterized by certain formal and archaic constructions, passive voice, lengthy nominalizations, frequent use of Latin and French loanwords, and highly specific vocabulary items whose meanings often diverge from their everyday usage. For instance, terms like *consideration*, *execution*, *party*, and *charge* have unique interpretations in legal contexts that differ from their general meanings (Tiersma, 1999; Mellinkoff, 1963).

According to Haigh (2018), legal English serves not only a communicative function but also a performative and symbolic one. It reinforces the authority and formality of the legal system and conveys precision, continuity, and gravity. However, this same precision often results in inaccessibility, particularly for second-language learners. The complex lexicon, syntactic density, and unusual collocations pose serious barriers to comprehension, especially in countries where English is not the first language.

2.2. Vocabulary in Legal ESP Contexts

Within the broader ESP framework, vocabulary plays a central role. Dudley-Evans and St John (1998) argue that vocabulary acquisition is the cornerstone of ESP competence, particularly in highly lexicalized fields like law. Legal vocabulary can be broadly divided into two categories: technical terms (e.g., *tort*, *statute*, *jurisdiction*) and

semi-technical or polysemous terms (e.g., *action*, *case*, *hearing*) that acquire specific meanings in legal contexts (Cabré, 1999; Bhatia, 1993).

Laufer and Nation's (1995) classification of vocabulary knowledge into receptive (recognizing and understanding) and productive (accurate use) aspects is particularly relevant for legal education. Many law students can recognize legal terms when they encounter them in texts but struggle to use them correctly in writing or speech. This productive deficiency limits their ability to participate effectively in legal discourse, both in academic and professional settings. Moreover, legal vocabulary often includes collocations and multi-word expressions (e.g., *bind by precedent*, *grant bail*, *file a petition*) that do not follow the logic of everyday English. Mastery of such combinations requires both explicit instruction and repeated exposure in context—conditions often missing in non-native learners' educational environments.

2.3. Legal English and Non-Native Speakers

Several studies have investigated the challenges faced by non-native speakers in acquiring legal English. Bhatia (1993) and Tiersma (1999) emphasize that these learners must not only master the vocabulary but also the genre conventions and rhetorical structures of legal texts. For example, case law judgments, statutes, contracts, and legal memos each follow different structural norms, and learners must adjust their language use accordingly.

In Asian contexts, researchers such as Kim (2006) and Lin (2014) have shown that legal English instruction often lacks contextual grounding, with students forced to memorize vocabulary without understanding how it is used in real-life legal communication. In multilingual environments like India, this problem is even more acute due to the mismatch between the language of instruction (English) and the students' linguistic background (often regional languages like Urdu, Hindi, or Telugu).

Studies conducted in India (Agnihotri, 2007; Kachru, 2005) reveal that learners from vernacular-medium backgrounds often enter higher education with weak foundations in academic English, let alone discipline-specific varieties like Legal English. In this context, Khan (2023) investigated writing errors among undergraduate ESL learners at Aligarh Muslim University and found that intralingual factors—such as inadequate grammatical competence—were the primary cause of persistent lexical and syntactic errors. These findings underscore the pressing need to address intralingual barriers when teaching specialized registers like Legal English to Urdu-Hindi speaking learners. For Urdu-speaking students, who often rely on translation-based learning and rote memorization, understanding abstract legal concepts through complex vocabulary is particularly difficult. These students may be able to reproduce definitions but are frequently unable to apply them in context—whether in legal reasoning, drafting, or examination writing.

2.4. Vocabulary Learning Strategies and Pedagogical Gaps

Research in second language acquisition (Nation, 2001; Schmitt, 2000) emphasizes the importance of deliberate vocabulary learning, contextual usage, and vocabulary recycling. Unfortunately, legal education in many universities remains largely teacher-centered, with little time dedicated to vocabulary-building activities. As a result, students often develop surface-level lexical knowledge—sufficient for passing exams but inadequate for authentic legal tasks.

Williams (2004) suggests that plain English movements and bilingual glossaries can support learners in transitioning from rote memorization to meaningful vocabulary use. Similarly, Gibbons (2003) recommends integrating legal discourse analysis and genre-based instruction into language teaching for law students. These approaches not only demystify legal jargon but also equip learners with strategies for interpreting and producing complex texts. Despite these recommendations, many Indian law schools, especially those catering to linguistically diverse populations, continue to use outdated teaching methods. The need for targeted pedagogical interventions becomes particularly urgent when considering the long-term professional impact of poor lexical competence. Without adequate vocabulary skills, students may graduate with degrees in law but remain unable to practice it confidently or effectively in English-speaking courts, law firms, or international settings.

2.5. Gaps in Existing Literature

While the existing scholarship provides valuable insights into the nature of legal English and its challenges for second-language learners, there are notable gaps. First, much of the research focuses on learners in Western or East Asian contexts, with limited attention paid to South Asian learners, particularly Urdu speakers. Second, studies tend to examine legal English instruction in postgraduate or professional environments, overlooking undergraduate law students who are still developing their academic and linguistic foundations.

This study addresses these gaps by focusing on LLB students at MANUU, a central university with a large Urdu-speaking student population. By examining the lexical challenges faced by these students through vocabulary testing, focus group discussions, and writing analysis, the study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of legal English learning in multilingual, non-elite educational contexts. It also builds on the call by ESP scholars to develop context-sensitive, learner-centred pedagogies that address the specific needs of underrepresented learner populations in legal education.

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Research Setting and context

The study was conducted in the School of Law, Maulana Azad National Urdu University (MANUU), Hyderabad. MANUU is a central university established to promote Urdu as a medium of education. A majority of students enrolled in the LLB program come from socio-linguistic backgrounds where Urdu is the dominant language of communication and previous education. As a result, their exposure to academic and legal English is often limited, making MANUU an appropriate and significant context for this research.

3.2. Research Design and Participants

This study adopts a mixed-methods design, integrating both quantitative and qualitative approaches to examine the lexical challenges faced by LLB students at Maulana Azad National Urdu University (MANUU) in learning Legal English. Multiple data sources—vocabulary proficiency test, focus group discussions (FGDs), and written assignment analysis—were employed to ensure triangulation, thereby increasing the study's validity and reliability.

The quantitative component (vocabulary test) captured students' levels of lexical knowledge, while the qualitative components (FGDs and writing analysis) provided deeper insights into learner experiences, classroom contexts, and actual language use.

A total of 60 undergraduate LLB students (2nd semester) participated in the study. Participants were selected using purposive sampling, with inclusion criteria:

- completion of at least one semester of legal education in English,
- Urdu as the primary language of instruction prior to joining MANUU,
- voluntary consent for participation.

Demographics included 42 males and 18 females, aged 19–24 years, predominantly from Urdu-medium schooling backgrounds, with varying levels of English proficiency. This diversity ensured that the findings captured a broad spectrum of experiences and challenges.

3.3. Research Tools and Data Collection Procedure

To collect valid and triangulated data, three tools were employed:

Legal Vocabulary Proficiency Test (Quantitative): A 30-item test was developed using legal textbooks, university exam papers, and standard glossaries. It included 15 multiple-choice items (receptive knowledge), 10 fill-in-the-blank/matching items (contextual recognition), and 5 short-answer prompts requiring productive use or Urdu translation of legal terms.

Focus Group Discussions (Qualitative): Two FGDs (45–60 minutes each) were conducted with 15 randomly selected students of varying proficiency levels. Semi-structured questions explored students' experiences in learning Legal English, difficulties in understanding legal terms, strategies for vocabulary acquisition, and teacher/classroom support.

Written Assignment Analysis (Qualitative): Thirty anonymized assignments (from subjects such as constitutional law, criminal procedure, and tort law) were examined for lexical accuracy, appropriateness of legal term usage, collocational errors, and frequency of Urdu-English code-mixing.

3.4. Data Collection Timeline (4 weeks):

Week 1: Vocabulary test administered with faculty approval.
Week 2: Test evaluated using a rubric; students grouped by proficiency.
Week 3: FGDs conducted and recorded with participant consent.
Week 4: Written assignments collected and analyzed using a qualitative coding framework.

3.5. Data Analysis and Ethics

Vocabulary test data were analysed using descriptive statistics to identify performance trends and proficiency categories, with results presented through tables and bar graphs. FGD transcripts were thematically coded to

highlight common patterns, lexical concerns, and learner insights, while assignments were examined for both frequency and type of lexical errors, as well as the presence or absence of productive legal vocabulary.

The study adhered to strict ethical protocols. Written and verbal informed consent was obtained; participation was voluntary with the right to withdraw; anonymity and confidentiality were ensured through pseudonyms and secure data storage; and the research was conducted with official approval from the Dean in compliance with the university's ethics policy.

4. Finding and Discussion

4.1. The Vocabulary Test Results: Quantitative Performance Patterns

The vocabulary test administered to 60 LLB students at MANUU was designed to evaluate their recognition, contextual understanding, and productive use of Legal English terms. The test consisted of 30 items, covering common legal terminology from contract law, criminal law, and constitutional law.
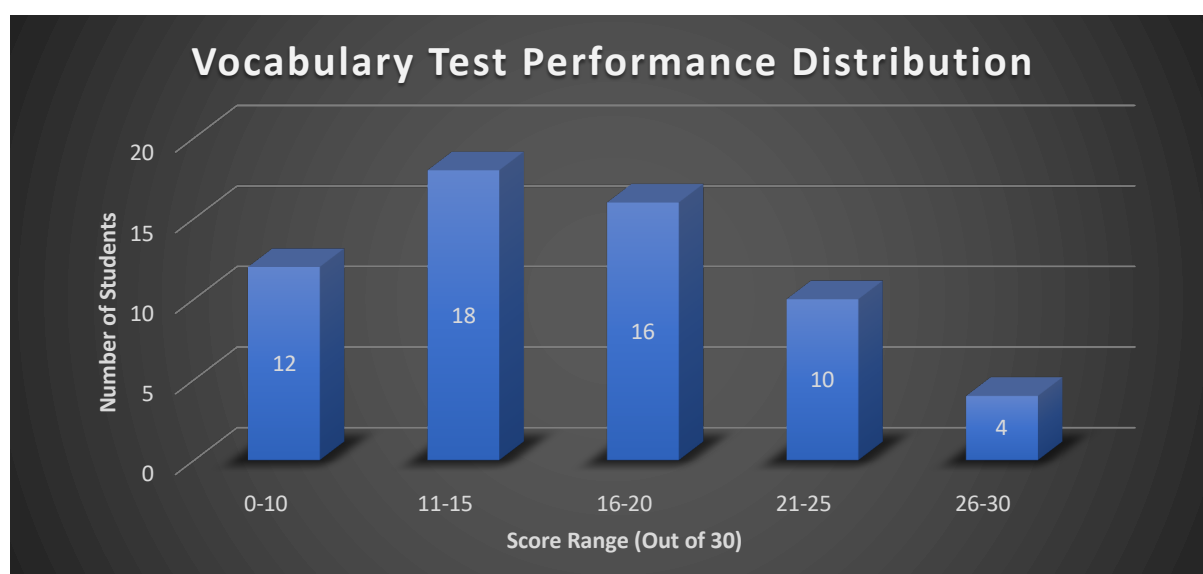

Figure:1. *Performance Distribution*

As illustrated in the bar chart above (Figure:1), the performance of the students varied significantly: 12 students (20%) scored between 0–10, indicating low recognition and usage of basic legal terms. These students often left answers blank or gave incorrect definitions of commonly used words like *tort*, *plaintiff*, and *jurisdiction*. 18 students (30%) fell into the 11–15 range. While they demonstrated some receptive vocabulary knowledge, their contextual and productive use remained limited. For instance, many confused *contract* with *contact* or *hearing* with *listening*. 16 students (26.7%) scored 16–20, suggesting a moderate grasp of basic legal vocabulary. They could often match terms with meanings but made errors in sentence-level usage, such as "The agreement is legal consideration is required." 10 students (16.7%) scored in the 21–25 range. These learners showed relatively stronger lexical competence and were able to use key terms correctly in short sentences. However, their accuracy dropped when handling more technical terms like *mens rea* or *jurisdictional clause*. Only 4 students (6.6%) achieved scores above 26, demonstrating high vocabulary proficiency. These students likely had prior exposure to English-medium education or legal content through reading or coaching.

The distribution of test scores indicates that 12 students scored between 0–10, 18 students scored between 11–15, and 16 students scored between 16–20. Cumulatively, this accounts for 46 out of 60 students. Thus, 12 + 18 + 16 = 46 students, representing 76.7% of the total participants. This performance pattern clearly suggests that a substantial majority of the cohort scored 20 or below, indicating limited lexical competence in Legal English students at MANUU.

The most frequent errors occurred in three key areas: Latin terms such as *res ipsa loquitur* and *prima facie*; polysemous legal words like *case*, *charge*, and *execution*; and the use of prepositions and collocations, for instance, writing *liable of* instead of *liable for*. Productive use, particularly writing complete and meaningful

sentences with legal terms, emerged as the weakest area, especially among students scoring below the 16-mark threshold. Moreover, the gap between recognition and usage was striking, while many students could correctly identify the meaning of words such as *contract*, they often struggled to apply them accurately in legal contexts.

The findings highlight an urgent call to action: legal English instruction must place stronger emphasis on vocabulary development, particularly in the foundational and early years of law study. Bridging the comprehension gap requires the strategic use of bilingual legal glossaries alongside rich, contextual examples. Equally important is the incorporation of active learning techniques, such as maintaining vocabulary journals, using flashcards, and engaging in role-play activities based on real legal scenarios, to ensure students not only recognize legal terms but can confidently apply them in practice.

4.2. Lexical Challenges: Insights from Focus Group Discussions

To gain deeper insights into students' real-world experiences and perceptions regarding the challenges of learning Legal English, two Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were conducted with selected LLB students at MANUU. Each group consisted of students from varying levels of vocabulary proficiency, as determined by the diagnostic test, to ensure a diversity of viewpoints. The FGDs were guided by semi-structured questions and lasted approximately 45–60 minutes each.

The transcripts were thematically analysed.

4.2.1. Difficulty with Latin and Archaic Legal Terms

Students across all proficiency levels reported significant difficulty with Latin phrases and archaic expressions that appear frequently in textbooks and case law but are rarely explained in class. As one participant shared: *"Sir, jab hum 'res judicata' ya 'prima facie' jaise terms dekhte hain, to samajhne mein dikkat hoti hai. Yeh terms school mein kabhi nahi padhe"* (FGD Participant A, Low Proficiency). This reflects the gap between the linguistic demands of legal materials and the learners' educational background.

To cope with these challenges, many students admitted either skipping unfamiliar terms or depending on peers for simplified explanations. Others relied on rote memorization, often recalling definitions but struggling to apply them in context. These strategies, while practical in the short term, limited students' ability to engage with legal texts critically and productively.

The findings underline the importance of systematically teaching Latin expressions within Legal English pedagogy. Integrating such terms into case discussions, practice briefs, or targeted vocabulary sessions would help learners move beyond surface-level recognition toward functional understanding, ensuring greater confidence in academic and professional legal discourse.

4.2.2. Confusion Between General and Legal Meanings of Words

Students consistently reported difficulty with polysemous legal vocabulary—terms that look familiar from everyday English but acquire specialized and often unexpected meanings in law. For example, *consideration* in contract law refers to the exchange of something of value between parties, a concept far removed from its ordinary sense of thoughtfulness. Similarly, *execution* can denote the act of signing or enforcing a legal document, or in another context, carrying out a death sentence, rather than simply completing a task. The term *party* is another frequent source of confusion, as in legal discourse it refers to individuals or groups involved in litigation, whereas in everyday use it is associated with social gatherings.

During focus group discussions, students admitted that this lexical ambiguity often disrupts comprehension and slows down their reading of legal texts. One participant observed: *"Hum log English to padh chuke hain school mein, par law mein wohi words ka matlab alag hota hai. Ye sab confuse karta hai"* (We have studied English in school, but in law the same words carry different meanings. This confuses us). Several students explained that they either skip over such terms, rely on rote memorization, or depend on peers for clarification, all of which limit their ability to grasp legal reasoning in depth. These struggles not only lead to semantic inaccuracies in assignments but also affect their confidence in classroom discussions and examinations.

4.2.3. Dependence on Translation and Peer Explanation

A recurring pattern that emerged from the data was students' reliance on Urdu translations as a primary strategy for coping with unfamiliar legal vocabulary. This practice took different forms—some students created personal glossaries in Urdu, others frequently consulted online translation tools, and many turned to peers for quick explanations in their first language. While this translanguaging approach provided an immediate sense of clarity and reduced anxiety during reading, it often resulted in only surface-level comprehension. For instance, one

student shared: *"Class mein jab koi legal word samajh nahi aata, to main apne dost se Urdu mein poochta hoon. Uska matlab yaad kar lete hain, lekin baad mein sahi se likhna mushkil hota hai"* (When I don't understand a legal word in class, I ask my friend in Urdu. I remember its meaning, but later it becomes difficult to use it correctly in writing).

This reliance on translation indicates that while the mother tongue serves as a valuable scaffolding tool, it does not always facilitate deeper understanding of the nuances or proper contextual application of legal terminology. Instead, students often retained only the gist of the concept in Urdu, which led to imprecise recall when they attempted to use the term in written assignments or examinations. Over-dependence on this strategy, without teacher guidance or structured vocabulary instruction, risks creating a gap between recognition and productive usage. This highlights the need to integrate translanguaging consciously into pedagogy, using bilingual resources as transitional support rather than as a permanent substitute for mastering legal English.

4.2.4.   Lack of Contextual Practice and Exposure

Students unanimously reported that legal terms were seldom introduced in meaningful or practice-oriented contexts. Vocabulary typically surfaced during textbook reading or lectures, where teachers provided direct translations or brief definitions but rarely extended instruction to show how these terms function within legal discourse. For example, one participant observed: *"Sir class mein teacher bas term ka matlab batate hain, par uska use kaise karna hai, ya usko case mein kaise samjhein, yeh nahi sikhaya jata"* (In class, teachers only explain the meaning of a term, but they don't teach how to actually use it or interpret it in a case). This indicates that students were often left with a theoretical awareness of terminology without opportunities to apply it in practice.

As a result, learners struggled to transfer lexical knowledge into core academic and professional activities such as writing case briefs, participating in debates, or drafting legal documents. The absence of reinforcement through real-world tasks hindered their ability to internalize word meanings, recall them effectively, and employ them with precision. This finding resonates with prior scholarship (Lin, 2014; Williams, 2004), which stresses that vocabulary acquisition in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) contexts requires deliberate recycling, scaffolding, and repeated exposure within authentic communicative settings. In the case of law students, however, such reinforcement appeared largely absent, leaving them dependent on rote memorization rather than functional understanding.

4.2.5.   Anxiety, Confidence Issues, and Classroom Participation

A subtle yet significant theme that emerged from the discussions was the psychological barrier students experienced when using unfamiliar legal vocabulary in academic or public settings. Many participants admitted that their hesitation was not due to a complete lack of knowledge but rather the fear of misusing terms in front of peers or faculty. This apprehension was particularly evident during oral tasks such as classroom discussions, presentations, or moot courts, where linguistic precision carries weight. As one student candidly explained: *"Sir, jab legal terms bolne ki baari aati hai, to main confuse ho jata hoon. Agar galat bol diya to sab hasenge, isliye chup rehta hoon"* (When it comes to using legal terms, I get confused. If I say it incorrectly, everyone will laugh, so I remain silent).

Such anxieties reveal that the challenge is not simply about acquiring vocabulary but about developing the confidence to deploy it in real-time communicative contexts. The lack of lexical confidence often results in silence, reduced participation, and missed opportunities to practice language in authentic scenarios, which further perpetuates the cycle of hesitation. This finding highlights the importance of fostering supportive classroom environments where learners are encouraged to experiment with legal terminology without fear of ridicule. Structured peer feedback, role-play exercises, and scaffolded practice in simulated legal settings could provide safe avenues for students to gradually build the confidence required to engage more actively in academic and professional discourse.

4.3. Written Assignment Analysis: Lexical Use in Academic Writing

In order to assess students' ability to apply legal vocabulary in academic contexts, a sample of 30 written assignments submitted by LLB students at MANUU was collected and analyzed. These assignments, which covered topics such as constitutional law, criminal procedure, and contract law, were selected to reflect real academic performance rather than classroom exercises. Each paper was anonymized and examined using a lexical coding framework focusing on accuracy, appropriateness, collocations, code-mixing, and productive usage of legal terminology.

4.3.1.   Criteria for Lexical Analysis

The analysis of students' work was organized around five parameters that revealed recurring challenges in legal English. Lexical accuracy measured whether legal terms were used correctly in spelling, form, and context, while lexical appropriateness focused on the suitability of terms within a legal framework. Collocational use highlighted errors in combining words into standard legal expressions, such as saying "make a petition" instead of "file a petition." A further issue was code-mixing, where students inserted Urdu or Hindi terms like *bayan* or *zabardasti* in place of English equivalents. Finally, semantic precision addressed difficulties with polysemous terms, such as misunderstanding "consideration" in contract law or "execution" in legal contexts. These parameters together illustrated the layered nature of students' lexical difficulties.

4.3.2.   Describing Lexical Errors

The analysis of written assignments revealed several recurring lexical issues that highlighted students' struggles in handling legal English with accuracy and precision. One of the most frequent problems was the incorrect usage of legal terms, with twenty-one out of thirty papers displaying errors such as *"complain"* instead of *"complaint."* This reflects not only gaps in lexical knowledge but also uncertainty about morphological forms, a difficulty commonly observed in learners of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) (Bhatia, 2014).

Another major issue was the overuse of vague or generic words such as *"thing," "person,"* or *"matter,"* which appeared in twenty papers. This tendency to avoid precise legal terminology indicates lexical insecurity, aligning with Hyland's (2007) observation that learners often rely on general vocabulary when subject-specific terms are unfamiliar or intimidating.

Polysemous confusion also emerged as a serious concern, with eighteen instances where students misinterpreted words carrying specialized meanings in legal contexts. For instance, one assignment included the sentence *"The party enjoyed the contract,"* which applied the everyday sense of "enjoyed" rather than the legal sense of *possessing rights under a contract.* Such confusion is consistent with Mellinkoff's (1963) characterization of legal language as a "language of polysemy and ambiguity," which often misleads novice learners unfamiliar with its technical register.

Similarly, collocational misuse was observed in fifteen papers, with phrases like *"make a petition"* replacing the correct *"file a petition."* Errors of this kind suggest a lack of exposure to formulaic expressions, which are central to legal English discourse (Coulthard & Johnson, 2010). Mastery of collocations is particularly vital, since legal meaning is often embedded in fixed expressions and multiword units.

A further pattern was literal translation from Urdu, seen in thirteen assignments, where students transferred expressions directly from their first language into English. For example, *"He gave his bayan in the court"* demonstrates the influence of L1 structures on L2 legal writing, echoing observations by Kachru (1983) about the persistence of local linguistic habits in South Asian Englishes. Additionally, twelve papers revealed code-mixing, such as *"He was arrested for zabardasti,"* reflecting students' reliance on Urdu when unable to recall appropriate English terms. This phenomenon has been widely noted in bilingual learning environments, where code-switching functions as both a coping mechanism and a marker of identity (Canagarajah, 2013).

Taken together, these patterns underscore not only the lexical challenges faced by law students but also the influence of prior linguistic repertoires on their acquisition of legal English. They highlight the urgent need for explicit vocabulary instruction, greater focus on collocations, and pedagogical strategies that bridge students' everyday language practices with the formal register of legal discourse.
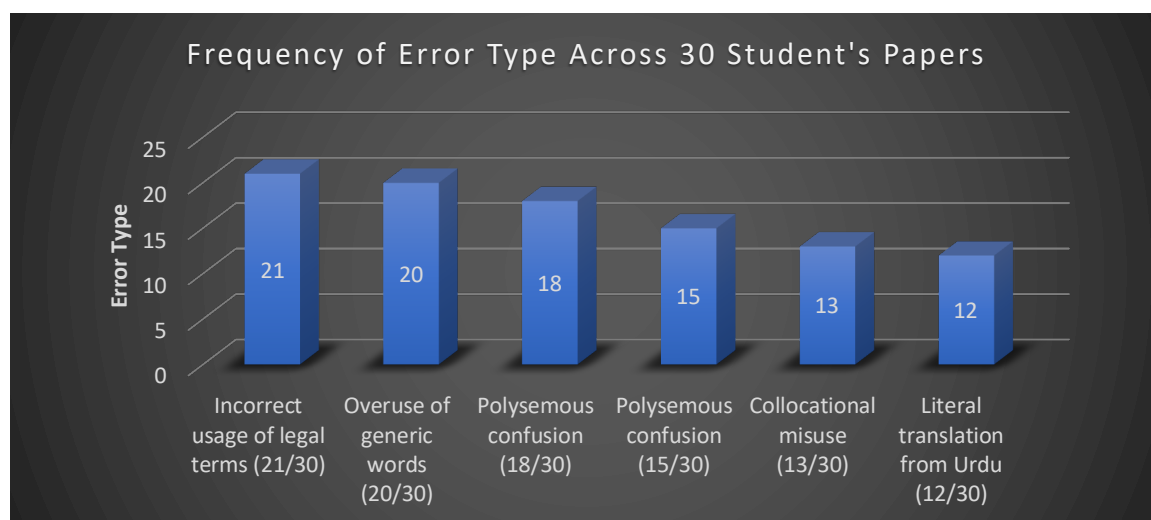
Figure:2. Frequency of Lexical Errors in 30 Student Assignments

The writing analysis clearly shows that even when students manage to pass exams or complete assignments, their productive command of legal vocabulary remains underdeveloped. This highlights the urgent need for guided legal writing practice that emphasizes the consistent use of precise legal terms rather than vague or generic substitutes. One useful approach could be the inclusion of model answers and structured checklists that demonstrate the correct use of collocations and formulaic expressions typical of legal discourse. At the same time, since many learners rely on code-mixing as a coping strategy, bilingual glossaries and other scaffolding tools may serve as transitional supports, gradually enabling students to replace reliance on Urdu with accurate legal English equivalents. Collaborative activities such as peer review exercises or vocabulary-focused workshops can also provide students with opportunities to refine their lexical choices in authentic writing contexts. Overall, the analysis of written assignments confirms that lexical challenges in legal English extend beyond passive recognition to affect productive usage, accuracy, and academic expression. These findings validate the need for systematic and targeted vocabulary instruction within legal writing pedagogy, particularly for Urdu-speaking learners in Indian law programs.

5. Conclusion

This study set out to explore the lexical challenges encountered by Urdu-speaking LLB students at MANUU in learning and using Legal English. Through a triangulated methodology involving a vocabulary test, focus group discussions, and written assignment analysis, the research uncovered a range of linguistic, pedagogical, and affective factors that shape students' ability to comprehend and apply legal vocabulary effectively. The findings demonstrated that a majority of students lack sufficient lexical proficiency, particularly in productive use, contextual application, and collocational patterns. Latin-derived terms, polysemous legal words, and unfamiliar syntactic structures emerged as significant barriers. The vocabulary test revealed low performance in both recognition and usage of legal terms, while written assignment analysis confirmed frequent misuse, code-mixing, and lexical imprecision. Focus group discussions added a human dimension to these results, highlighting student anxiety, classroom silence, and a reliance on Urdu for comprehension.

These challenges suggest that lexical difficulties are not simply the result of inadequate word memorization but are deeply tied to instructional practices, classroom environments, and learners' linguistic backgrounds. In order to address these issues, legal vocabulary instruction must be explicitly integrated into the core curriculum rather than treated as a peripheral skill. Weekly sessions focusing on legal vocabulary in connection with current law topics, the use of bilingual glossaries (English–Urdu), and thematic vocabulary lists covering fields such as criminal and constitutional law would provide systematic scaffolding. Such measures would help students gradually develop precision and confidence in their use of legal English. Ultimately, the study confirms that without targeted lexical support, Urdu-speaking law students face barriers in fully engaging with academic and professional legal discourse, underscoring the need for a reformed pedagogy tailored to their context (Bhatia, 2014).

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declare no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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