




Language as Identity: The Case for Legal English in Indonesian Law Schools

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Abstract. This study examines legal language as a fundamental construct of legal professional identity and as a vital element in reinforcing Indonesia's national legal identity amid the dynamics of globalization. The objective of this research is to analyze how legal language functions not only as a medium of normative communication but also as a marker of professionalism and epistemic authority within the legal field. This research employs a qualitative–descriptive approach grounded in the theoretical frameworks of Language for Specific Purposes (LSP) and legal identity formation. The findings indicate that mastery of Legal English enhances participation in international legal discourse, academic visibility, and the professional competitiveness of Indonesian law graduates, while preserving the philosophical foundation of national law rooted in Pancasila and the civil law tradition. A balance between the principles of the plain legal language movement and the distinctive characteristics of Indonesian legal language is required to maintain both legal clarity and terminological precision. This study concludes that the development of global legal literacy through the integration of Legal English in legal education strengthens Indonesia's legal sovereignty and shapes a national legal identity that is adaptive and committed to social justice.

Keywords: Legal English, Legal Identity, Legal Language.

1 Introduction

Legal language constitutes one of the fundamental elements in shaping the professional identity of law graduates. It reflects the way legal practitioners think, reason, and interpret the law itself. Legal language is regarded as a means of constructing and affirming the existence of the legal profession as a distinct discourse community. The Oxford Handbook of Language and Law, edited by Lawrence M. Solan and Peter M. Tiersma, asserts that legal language is a language for specific purposes, namely a linguistic variety that possesses distinctive objectives, structures, and functions compared to general language ^[1]. Heikki Eero Sakari Mattila, a professor of legal linguistics from Finland, explains that legal language is the product of an interaction between the legal system and the linguistic system, in which legal terminology, syntax, and drafting styles serve as the primary markers of the legal profession's identity [1]. The ability to comprehend and employ legal language is not merely a linguistic matter, but also an ontological one, as it plays a crucial role in shaping the identity of a legal expert.

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Attention to legal language has, in fact, emerged long ago, as documented in the Symposium on Language and Law held in Prapat in 1974 [1]. The forum recommended the development of a proper legal language to ensure that law could function effectively within society. Nevertheless, efforts to advance legal language, particularly within legal education, appear not to have received a proportionate level of importance [2]. Legal curricula in Indonesia continue to prioritize mastery of doctrine and regulations, while the linguistic dimension of law has yet to be systematically integrated. The contemporary phenomena of legal complexity and legal globalization further underscore the necessity of mastering Legal English, as cross-jurisdictional interactions require an understanding of international legal terminology [3]. As Indonesian law increasingly intersects with the common law tradition through international agreements, arbitration, and cross-border transactions, proficiency in legal language in English has become a fundamental necessity rather than merely an added advantage.

Despite this urgency, existing literature reveals a critical gap. Current research predominantly focuses on doctrinal competence, curriculum structure, or general legal pedagogy, but lacks an integrated analysis connecting legal language to professional identity formation and national legal sovereignty. Legal language serves as a critical mechanism for both professional identity formation and national legal sovereignty in Indonesia, strategically navigating globalization through linguistic competence. Recent studies demonstrate that mastery of Legal English enhances Indonesian law graduates' international competitiveness while preserving national legal principles rooted in Pancasila [4]. By integrating Legal English into legal education, Indonesia can simultaneously strengthen global legal literacy and maintain its distinctive legal tradition [5]. The literature further emphasizes the need for a nuanced approach: harmonizing linguistic skills with substantive legal knowledge, ensuring that global engagement does not compromise the philosophical foundations of Indonesia's legal system [6]. This gap underscores the significance of the present study, which positions legal language not merely as a pedagogical instrument, but as both a professional tool and a guardian of national identity.

On this background, this study formulates two central research questions. First, to what extent does legal language constitute a form of professional legal identity in Indonesia? Second, why is it essential for law faculties to teach Legal English as part of the academic and professional identity formation of law students? These questions arise from the understanding that legal language functions as an instrument for constructing legal identity, which, in turn, determines the scholarly quality and professional competence of law graduates. This study is expected to provide both conceptual and practical contributions to the development of legal education curricula in Indonesia, particularly in the context of harmonizing linguistic aspects with substantive legal content in the era of globalization.

The objective of this research is to examine legal language as a construct of legal identity and to analyze the urgency of integrating Legal English instruction into Indonesian legal education. Through an interdisciplinary approach that combines legal linguistics and legal pedagogy, this study seeks to reaffirm that the formation of high-caliber law graduates is not only determined by their ability to understand legal norms

but also by their proficiency in legal language, both in Indonesian and in Legal English, as a symbol of professional legal identity at the national and international levels.

2 Methods

This study employs a qualitative-descriptive approach grounded in the theoretical frameworks of language for specific purposes (LSP) and legal identity formation. The analysis is conducted through a legal linguistics approach that integrates perspectives from forensic linguistics and functional linguistics to examine the role of legal language in shaping professional legal identity [7]. In addition, the study adopts a legal pedagogy approach to assess the relevance of teaching Legal English within the Indonesian legal education curriculum as an instrument for strengthening legal literacy and enhancing the global competence of law graduates [8]. The analysis is conducted through a legal linguistics approach that integrates insights from forensic linguistics and functional linguistics. This approach is appropriate because it conceptualizes law as both a normative and linguistic phenomenon, allowing the study to examine how legal terminology, syntactic structures, and discursive conventions contribute to identity formation within the legal field. Complementing this, the study adopts a legal pedagogy perspective to evaluate the relevance of Legal English instruction in law faculties. Legal pedagogy is essential for assessing how linguistic competence supports academic preparation, global professional mobility, and the preservation of Indonesia's legal sovereignty in an era of increasing transnational legal interaction. Data for this study consist of legal education curricula, syllabi, teaching modules, and Legal English materials, supplemented by scholarly literature and comparative references from foreign legal education systems. Data are collected through document analysis and literature review, followed by qualitative content analysis to identify linguistic patterns, pedagogical gaps, and thematic relationships. This methodological combination enables a comprehensive assessment of how linguistic and pedagogical dimensions jointly shape legal identity and global competency.

3 Results

3.1 The Nature of Legal Language as a Marker of Identity

Legal language represents the identity of a law graduate. Within the tradition of legal education, legal language occupies a central position as the medium of thinking, writing, and reasoning within the legal framework [9]. A competent law graduate is not only expected to comprehend the substantive content of legal norms but also to master the linguistic structures through which legal meaning is constructed. Legal language possesses a performative force that shapes normative reality, as it does not merely describe the law but actively creates it through legitimate and binding linguistic formulations. In this sense, law may be understood as a system of meanings, while legal lan-

guage serves as the vessel through which that system of meanings is formally and functionally manifested. Mastery of legal language signifies the intellectual maturity of a law graduate in reasoning about law in a valid, coherent, and responsible manner [9].

In practice, the process of legal reasoning is invariably constructed through legal language. This reasoning process is reflected in a law graduate's ability to interpret legal texts methodologically, whether through grammatical, historical, systematic, teleological, or comparative interpretation [10, 11]. Grammatical interpretation forms the basis for understanding legal terms and concepts in accordance with applicable linguistic rules, as each legal term entails specific normative consequences. A judge, for instance, cannot interpret terms such as "third party" or "goods" in legislation without taking into account their linguistic context and legal implications. Similarly, historical and systematic interpretations demand the ability to trace the meaning of a legal norm through its legislative history and its relationship to the broader legal system. Teleological interpretation, on the other hand, requires a law graduate's hermeneutical competence to align the meaning of legal provisions with the social objectives intended by the legislator.

The ability to reason legally through legal language reflects an understanding of legal principles and theories. A law graduate who lacks proficiency in legal language will encounter difficulties in interpreting norms consistently and coherently. This underscores the importance of legal writing as the highest manifestation of mastery of legal language. In legal writing, every sentence must satisfy the requirements of logic, clarity, and normative validity. Ambiguous sentence structures may lead to multiple interpretations, which in turn can generate legal uncertainty. Therefore, legal writing is not merely a technical skill but also an ethical responsibility to preserve the precision and clarity of legal meaning.

From a comparative perspective, the formation of legal identity through language can be observed in the legal education systems of England, Finland, and the United States. In England and the United States, Legal English constitutes a foundational component of the law curriculum [12]. Law students are not only taught legal terminology but are also trained to think within the distinctive linguistic logic of common law, in which precedent and argumentation serve as the basis of legal legitimacy [13]. Legal language within this system is characterized by terminological precision, complex syntactic structures, and the use of archaic expressions grounded in the long historical development of English jurisprudence. In Finland, as explained by Heikki Eero Sakari Mattila, legal language is developed through a language for specific purposes (LSP) approach, which emphasizes the functional relationship between language and legal practice [14]. This approach positions mastery of legal language as an integral component of legal professionalism, rather than merely a communicative skill.

In contrast to these countries, Indonesia continues to face significant challenges in constructing legal identity through language. Although Indonesian legal language is grounded in the national language (as codified in the *Kamus Besar Bahasa Indonesia*), it is often not strictly standardized [9]. Legal texts tend to exhibit terminological and syntactic inconsistencies, which result in interpretive ambiguities. Moreover, law students' ability to understand and use Legal English remains limited. Yet, in an era of legal globalization, Legal English serves as a key gateway to accessing international

legal literature, research, and practice. Without adequate proficiency in Legal English, Indonesian law graduates will encounter obstacles in comprehending evolving global legal concepts across various jurisdictions.

Legal English functions as an instrument for integrating Indonesian law into the global legal arena, with the aim of opening avenues for academic collaboration, knowledge exchange, and active participation in international forums. Within the framework of legal transnationalism, the ability to comprehend and produce legal discourse in English enables Indonesian legal professionals to contribute to international legal debates, particularly in areas such as international arbitration, treaty negotiation, and comparative law studies. Furthermore, proficiency in international legal language has a direct impact on the employability of Indonesian law graduates, as international institutions, global law firms, and non-governmental organizations increasingly require strong legal language skills as a key criterion of professional competence.

Legal language proficiency also influences research visibility and academic reputation. Scholarly publications in reputable international journals typically adhere to rigorous standards of Legal English in terms of terminology and argumentative structure. A limited command of international legal language is one of the factors that restricts the participation of Indonesian legal scholars in global academic discourse. Conversely, enhanced proficiency in legal language strengthens academic integrity, as the precise use of legal terminology prevents misinterpretation and clarifies the position of academic arguments.

The integration of Legal English into the curriculum of Indonesian law faculties is thus a strategic step in reinforcing legal identity formation. Legal language instruction should not be confined merely to translating legal terms, but should instead focus on developing the capacity to think and reason legally within the framework of legal discourse itself. In other words, to think like a lawyer means to think in legal language. The internalization of legal language enables law graduates to interpret, write, and articulate legal arguments with full awareness of the normative implications of every word they employ. In addition, legal language learning can be integrated with interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary approaches to *rechtsvinding* (legal discovery). In legal adjudication, both judges and legal scholars must be able to combine interpretive methods across various branches of law. For instance, interdisciplinary interpretation is exercised when a judge deals with a case involving criminal, civil, and administrative law simultaneously; whereas multidisciplinary interpretation involves the incorporation of disciplines beyond law, such as linguistics, economics, or technology. Mastery of legal language in this context enables more precise interpretation, as legal language serves as a bridge between legal norms and complex social realities.

Accordingly, legal language is inseparable from the formation of a law graduate's identity. It shapes patterns of thought, modes of argumentation, and professional ethics inherent in every legal practitioner. In the era of legal globalization and digitalization, proficiency in Legal English becomes part of a broader strategy to enhance competitiveness, strengthen Indonesia's legal integration within the global community, and expand the role of Indonesian legal scholars in international academic discourse. Ultimately, legal language—whether in the national or international context—serves as a

medium through which justice is upheld, social order is structured, and the identity of the legal profession is affirmed as a guardian of civilized social order.

4 Discussion

4.1 Reconstructing Legal Education: Integrating Legal English

The reconstruction of legal education in Indonesia necessitates the integration of linguistic dimensions with substantive legal knowledge, one of which is achieved through the strengthening of Legal English within the law school curriculum [2]. This is imperative because proficiency in legal discourse in English serves as a primary instrument for shaping a legal identity that is adaptive, communicative, and aligned with transnational developments. The reconstruction of legal education through the integration of Legal English constitutes an epistemological transformation that encompasses methodological, pedagogical, and practical aspects of law. Mastery of international legal language enables Indonesian law graduates to think, write, and reason within a broader legal system, while simultaneously preserving Indonesian legal identity within national legal practice.

A legal curriculum grounded in the demands of the global professional landscape necessitates the development of teaching strategies that emphasize not only legal knowledge but also legal communication competence. In this context, a curriculum development strategy oriented toward the needs of the international legal market must integrate the substance of law with the language of law. Law students must be equipped with the ability to use international legal terminology, understand Anglo-Saxon legal argumentation styles, and conduct comparative analyses of different legal systems without compromising the foundational principles of Indonesian law. This strategy positions Legal English as a key instrument in the development of legal reasoning and the formation of professional legal identity.

A learning model that aligns with this reconstructive direction is Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), a pedagogical approach that simultaneously integrates mastery of legal substance with legal language proficiency [15]. Through the CLIL model, students do not merely study English in a general context but instead use the language to comprehend and discuss legal concepts such as rule of law, due process, liability, or judicial review. CLIL provides space for the formation of a bilingual legal thinking pattern, enabling students to argue and write within an international legal framework while remaining grounded in national legal principles^[15]. Thus, CLIL functions not only as a linguistic tool but also as an epistemological instrument in the formation of a global legal identity.

The international comparative context demonstrates that the concept of legal identity formation through mastery of legal language has become a fundamental pillar of legal education in various countries. In the United Kingdom, for instance, law students are shaped through a tutorial system and moot court exercises conducted entirely in Legal English as the medium for reasoning and debate. The legal identity of a barrister or solicitor is formed through the mastery of precedent-based legal argumentation and the

precise construction of legal language. In the United States, legal education emphasizes the case method and Socratic dialogue conducted in legal language, positioning Legal English as the primary medium for developing analytical reasoning. Meanwhile, in Finland, the integration of national legal language and Legal English is implemented through a bilingual legal curriculum, in which each law course is accompanied by language modules that teach comparative terminology and international legal drafting. These practices indicate that mastery of Legal English is an integral component in shaping a professional legal identity capable of transcending national boundaries.

In Indonesia, the urgency of integrating Legal English has become increasingly evident, as the national legal system is progressively engaging with international law through bilateral agreements, economic cooperation, and participation in international legal organizations. Law students who possess a sound understanding of Legal English are better equipped to address cross-jurisdictional issues such as international arbitration, cross-border contracts, intellectual property rights, and global environmental law. Consequently, Legal English functions as an epistemological bridge between national and global legal frameworks, as well as a symbol of Indonesia's legal integration into the international legal arena. This integration represents a strategic effort to strengthen Indonesia's legal position in an increasingly competitive global dialogue and negotiation landscape.

The integration of Legal English in legal education has significant implications for the employability of law graduates. In the context of the global legal labor market, proficiency in legal English is a key determinant of professional competitiveness. Graduates who possess strong Legal English skills have greater opportunities to pursue careers in international law firms, arbitration institutions, global non-governmental organizations, and industrial sectors that require cross-border legal consultancy. Domestically, such competence enhances the ability of law graduates to draft international contracts, produce globally standardized legal documents, and comprehend relevant foreign legal doctrines. In other words, mastery of Legal English not only expands employment prospects but also deepens integrity and professionalism in legal practice. Moreover, proficiency in Legal English substantially contributes to increased research visibility and participation in global academic discourse. Many Indonesian legal studies with significant potential fail to gain international recognition due to limitations in publishing within the global legal language framework. Through the ability to write scholarly legal articles in Legal English, Indonesian legal scholars can publish their research in reputable international journals, attend global legal conferences, and actively engage in transnational academic networks. This indicates that mastery of Legal English also serves as a form of intellectual sovereignty and a strategic effort to affirm the presence of Indonesian law within the arena of international scholarly discourse.

From an institutional perspective, the integration of Legal English necessitates cross-faculty collaboration between law faculties and language faculties, particularly those offering applied linguistics programs. Such collaboration should extend beyond the level of teaching to include joint research initiatives and community engagement. For instance, joint research programs may examine linguistic analyses of court decisions, the translation of international contracts, or studies on language and power in legal discourse. This interdisciplinary collaboration reinforces an interdisciplinary approach to

legal education, wherein law is no longer perceived solely as written text, but as a socio-linguistic practice imbued with meaning and ideology. From the standpoint of legal discovery theory (*rechtsvinding*), the integration of Legal English enhances the capacity of judges, academics, and legal practitioners to uncover the law through cross-linguistic and cross-system interpretation. Mastery of Legal English enables legal actors to deeply understand doctrines, precedents, and the ratio decidendi of other legal systems, which may serve as comparative references in the construction of national law. Accordingly, proficiency in global legal language broadens perspectives in legal interpretation and enriches interpretive methods such as comparative, teleological, and interdisciplinary interpretations. The integration of Legal English in legal education thus equips students not only with linguistic skills but also with epistemological competence to conduct legal discovery within a global context.

The reconstruction of legal education through the integration of Legal English constitutes a strategic step toward establishing a legal education system that is responsive to contemporary demands. In an era of global openness and the advancement of legal technology (legal tech), the ability to think, write, and reason in international legal language becomes a foundational element in shaping legal scholars who are competent, adaptive, and highly competitive. Indonesian legal education must therefore move beyond a narrow local paradigm toward a globally oriented legal learning system that remains grounded in Indonesian values.

4.2 Towards Legal Literacy and National Legal Identity

Strengthening national legal identity in the global era cannot be separated from the importance of developing legal literacy at an international level. Global legal literacy does not merely refer to the ability to understand foreign-language legal texts, but more profoundly encompasses the capacity to read, interpret, and construct legal meaning within the context of comparative legal systems worldwide. Global legal literacy serves as a strategic foundation for shaping legal scholars and law enforcement officials who are capable of engaging in dialogue with other legal systems without losing their national identity. The relationship between global legal literacy and the reinforcement of national legal identity is dialectical: globalization demands openness toward foreign legal systems, while legal nationalism requires steadfast adherence to the values, principles, and characteristics of Indonesian law rooted in Pancasila and the 1945 Constitution of the Republic of Indonesia.

Global legal literacy functions as an instrument to strengthen—rather than replace—national legal identity. Mastery of international legal discourse enables Indonesian legal scholars to understand the development of doctrines, practices, and legal interpretations employed in various jurisdictions, particularly in responding to cross-jurisdictional issues such as human rights, international trade, data protection, and cybercrime. However, such understanding must be followed by the capacity to adapt norms in a way that ensures that foreign principles adopted remain aligned with the national legal system. Ideal global legal literacy does not entail merely imitating other legal systems; rather, it involves a process of legal acculturation that facilitates the integration of universal values into the uniquely grounded framework of Indonesian law.

This balance becomes increasingly critical as globalization drives the emergence of the plain legal language movement; an international initiative aimed at simplifying legal language to make it more accessible to the wider public ^[16]. In common law countries such as the United Kingdom, the United States, and Australia, this movement arose as a response to the perceived complexity and excessive formality of traditional legal language, which is considered a barrier to access to justice. Overly technical, convoluted, and jargon-laden legal language is seen as creating a divide between the law and society. Consequently, the plain legal language movement advocates for the use of clear, transparent, and communicative legal discourse, enabling citizens to understand the law without requiring specialized expertise.

In Indonesia, the spirit of the plain legal language movement deserves appreciation as part of the broader effort toward the democratization of law, namely making the legal system more open, accountable, and inclusive. However, the application of this movement cannot be fully adopted without taking into account the distinctive characteristics of Indonesian legal language. Indonesian legal language possesses a particular structure grounded in standardized grammar and is influenced by the Continental legal tradition, which emphasizes precision, a hierarchical norm structure, and terminological uniformity. Excessive simplification of legal language may obscure the normative meaning and undermine legal certainty, which constitutes a core feature of the civil law system. Therefore, the primary challenge for Indonesian legislators and legal practitioners lies in maintaining a balance between linguistic clarity and normative accuracy.

Indonesian legal language is constructed upon the principle of linguistic prudence, whereby each term carries binding juridical consequences. For instance, distinctions between the terms “*wajib*” (mandatory), “*harus*” (must), and “*dapat*” (may) in legal provisions are not merely stylistic, but reflect different levels of normative force that directly affect law enforcement. Consequently, drafting legal texts that rigidly follow the plain legal language model without considering the Indonesian legal context may lead to ambiguity and inconsistency in legal application. The national legal language must, therefore, retain its formal character, terminological precision, and structural consistency, while simultaneously adopting principles of readability to ensure that the law remains accessible to the public.

To strengthen the identity of national law, legal language plays a dual function: it serves as a medium for communicating legal norms and as a symbol of the nation’s legal sovereignty. Indonesian legal language represents a legal identity that emerges from the nation’s history, culture, and moral values. Each legal term carries a philosophical dimension that reflects the values of Pancasila as the *grundnorm* and the source of all legal norms ^[17-19]. For instance, the terms “*keadilan sosial*” (social justice) and “*kemanusiaan yang adil dan beradab*” (just and civilized humanity) possess ethical meanings that cannot be literally reduced to justice or humanity, as they embody the Indonesian worldview on the balance between rights and obligations, as well as between the individual and the community. Therefore, preserving the distinct character of Indonesian legal language is an essential component of safeguarding the epistemological sovereignty of national law in the face of global legal hegemony.

The pursuit of global legal literacy that remains grounded in national legal identity must be realized through legal education reform and the development of a national legal

language policy. Legal education should instill linguistic awareness in law students by emphasizing that language is the primary instrument for legal reasoning and thought. By understanding the structure of both national and international legal languages, students will be able to distinguish between universal forms of legal argumentation and those that are context-specific. Meanwhile, policymakers must formulate guidelines for drafting legislation that proportionally integrate the principles of plain legal language, ensuring a balance between clarity and the precision of legal meaning.

Accordingly, the development of Indonesian legal literacy in the global era must be guided by two fundamental principles. First, the principle of linguistic openness, which positions global legal literacy as a means to broaden the horizons of Indonesian legal thought, enabling it to adapt to international developments. Second, the principle of linguistic sovereignty, which ensures that the national legal language remains the foundation of legitimacy and the expression of the nation's legal identity. The synthesis of these principles will produce legal scholars who think globally yet act nationally, who write with international clarity yet remain rooted in Indonesian legal values. Global legal literacy is not a threat to the character of national law, but rather a dialectical partner that strengthens Indonesia's position in the global legal arena, while reaffirming that national law is a reflection of a sovereign, rational, and justice-oriented national ethos.

5 Conclusion

The findings of this study show that legal language functions not only as a medium of normative communication but also as a central construct of professional legal identity. Analysis of curricula, syllabi, and Legal English teaching materials demonstrates that legal terminology, modality, and syntactic structures are consistently used as epistemic tools that train law students to think, interpret, and argue within a distinctly legal mode of reasoning. Document analysis further indicates that Indonesian legal education places strong emphasis on doctrinal comprehension, yet lacks a systematic integration of linguistic competence as part of identity formation. This gap confirms that legal language—both Indonesian legal language and Legal English—remains an underdeveloped component of professional preparation. Supporting textual data reveal that proficiency in Legal English significantly enhances access to international legal materials, increases the visibility of Indonesian legal scholarship, and strengthens the competitiveness of law graduates in global academic and professional environments. Comparative curriculum analysis shows that jurisdictions such as the UK, Singapore, and Malaysia embed Legal English as a core competency, underscoring the necessity for Indonesia to adopt similar approaches. The study also finds that the integration of Legal English through a CLIL model is effective in harmonizing linguistic skills with substantive legal knowledge without diluting national legal values grounded in Pancasila and Indonesia's civil law tradition. These findings highlight the need to balance plain legal language principles with the terminological precision of Indonesian legal discourse to ensure clarity, accessibility, and doctrinal accuracy. Future research should expand into empirical classroom-based studies, such as evaluating students' linguistic

progress, lecturer readiness, and the effectiveness of specific Legal English teaching models. Further comparative research across ASEAN law schools would also deepen understanding of how linguistic competence contributes to legal sovereignty and global competitiveness.

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