

ENGLISH MEDIUM INSTRUCTION IN LEGAL CLASSROOM: SHAPING LAW STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS AND PROFESSIONAL ASPIRATIONS

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Abstract

In the era of globalization, language proficiency, particularly in English, has become a significant asset in the professional world, including the field of Law. English is not only used in international contracts and arbitration but also serves as a symbol of global professional competence. This study explores the perceptions of law students at Syiah Kuala University who are enrolled in International Classes—with English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI)—regarding the impact of English proficiency on their career prospects. Using a mixed-method approach combining quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews, this study analyses students' learning experiences in an EMI environment and their expectations for their professional aspirations. The results indicate that students are motivated by the dual benefits of EMI—mastery of substantive Law content and enhanced linguistic capital. Students face challenges in understanding technical legal terminology and navigating linguistic gaps outside the classroom. However, they remain optimistic and show strong perseverance. Students view English as an important cultural asset for penetrating the global legal market. This study concludes that the success of EMI in a legal context requires strong academic-linguistic support, realistic expectation management, and a clear connection between classroom learning and professional aspirations. These findings have important implications for the

development of internationally-oriented legal curricula and strategies to enhance the effectiveness of EMI programs.

Keywords: *English Medium Instruction, Law Students, Professional Aspirations.*

Introduction

In an increasingly intense era of globalization, language skills have become one of the most vital skills in the professional world (Nurulhaq et al., 2024). With borderless cross-border interactions, multinational collaboration, and access to international networks, individuals are required to be able to communicate effectively in various cultural and linguistic contexts. Amidst this dynamic landscape, English has emerged as the global lingua franca, not only in cross-border communication but also in the realms of business, socio-politics, and higher education (Akther, 2022; Rahman & Saputra, 2021).

This development is inseparable from the role of English as the primary means of communication in building professional and academic connections in global life. With the increasing adoption of English as the corporate language by multinational companies, individuals who are proficient in this language gain wider access to career opportunities, both in local and global contexts (Peltokorpi, 2023). Various studies have found that English proficiency correlates with lower unemployment rates and increased career mobility, particularly in countries where English is not the primary language in the decades (Blake et al., 2018; Gazzola & Mazzacani, 2019; Grin & Vaillancourt, 2021; Park, 2011; Sánchez-García, 2022).

In the legal profession, English occupies a pivotal role due to its dominance in transnational legal practices. Here, language serves as the primary instrument in various international contracts, arbitration processes, and cross-border litigation, making it an essential skill for legal professionals (Salomone & Salomone, 2022). The ability to understand and apply international legal terminology is a decisive advantage in accessing global careers, postgraduate programs, and broader international legal networks (Roberts, 2017; Rumalessin & Farah, 2021).

Within the theoretical framework, English language skills can be analyzed through the lens of human capital theory. This theory, proposed by Becker in 1962, posits that the skills and knowledge an individual possesses constitute an investment in themselves, yielding returns in the form of increased productivity and career achievements (Aslam et al., 2024). English language proficiency, in this case, functions as human capital that not only enhances an individual's capacity in the workplace but also sends a positive signal to employers regarding their professional competencies (Grishnova & Panaseiko, 2021; Holborow, 2021; Naka & Spahija, 2022).

Employees of a company who have high English proficiency are often seen as adaptive individuals, capable of working in a multicultural environment, and quick to absorb new information and knowledge. This makes them more competitive in the job market, especially in the context of internationally oriented organizations (Peltokorpi, 2023). Empirical research also supports this argument. Grin & Vaillancourt (2021) found that individuals who are fluent in English have a greater chance of being recruited by multinational companies and occupying managerial or leadership positions. Additionally, other studies have shown a correlation between English proficiency and increased income across various job sectors (Malokani et al., 2023; Yan et al., 2024).

According to Isadaud et al. (2022), EMI in Indonesian context, English language skills have become an important indicator in employee recruitment by companies with international networks. In the legal field, English proficiency enables law students and graduates to participate in prestigious internships, pursue further studies abroad, and establish connections with international law firms (Hidayat, 2024). Mastery of international legal terms and understanding of foreign legal systems are increasingly sought-after assets in the legal world (Djuraev, 2025), which is no longer limited by geographical boundaries.

In the context of contemporary higher education, English proficiency has become an imperative, not merely an asset. This phenomenon has led to the widespread adoption of English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI), which is the practice of using English to teach substantive courses outside the realm of language teaching

itself (Chang, 2023; Dearden, 2018; Isadaud et al., 2022; Lasagabaster, 2022; Rose et al., 2023). EMI has emerged as a key strategy in the internationalization agenda of universities around the world, driven by the demands of globalization in the labor market, which requires graduates to be able to compete internationally, as well as the need to access and contribute to the global scientific knowledge repertoire, which is dominated by English-language publications. Conceptually, EMI is seen as a bridge connecting national higher education institutions with global academic and professional networks, enhancing the visibility and competitiveness of these institutions.

The implementation of EMI is believed to bring dual benefits to university students. On the one hand, this method seeks to improve their English language skills through authentic exposure and use in meaningful academic contexts (Li & Pei, 2024). On the other hand, the EMI has the potential to develop a range of essential cognitive and global competencies, which are often considered more important. Content learning through a foreign language is thought to stimulate critical thinking skills because students must process complex information in a language that is not their mother tongue, stimulating metacognition and deeper understanding (Tsou, 2021). Additionally, exposure to international perspectives and global literature through EMI fosters global awareness and intercultural competence, preparing students for cross-cultural work environments and collaboration (Yuzar et al., 2022; Yuzar, 2020). Cognitive flexibility, the ability to switch between thinking frameworks and language systems, is also honed through this bilingual learning experience (Azmy et al., 2024; Rahman, 2020; Tietze et al., 2014; Wasfie et al., 2023).

Based on the previous studies and background of the research, the successful implementation of English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) depends heavily on careful planning, adequate resources, and continuous evaluation that takes into account the local context. EMI, which is increasingly being drawn on by non-English-speaking higher education institutions in various countries, aims to improve the competitiveness of graduates in the global market through learning in English. However, the

effectiveness of EMI is not only determined by the implementation of teaching, but also by how students perceive its benefits in shaping their professional aspirations.

While existing research have widely explored the institutional and pedagogical aspects of EMI, the dimension of students' viewpoints and experiences remains underexplored, particularly in specialized discipline such as Law. Moreover, most studies have focused on general perceptions of EMI in broad educational settings, without sufficiently examining how English proficiency is perceived as influencing students' career trajectories within professionally contextualized settings. This indicates a gap between general EMI implementation and research that investigates the professional implications of EMI in specialized academic programs.

In this context, this study aims to explore the perceptions of law students at Syiah Kuala University enrolled in the International Class—with English as the medium of instruction—regarding the impact of English proficiency on enhancing their career prospects in the field of law. By examining their learning experiences in the EMI environment and their expectations for their professional aspirations, this objective of this study is to elucidate to what extent English language skills are considered relevant, useful, or even a barrier in the legal context, while also revealing its implications for the development of an international law-based program.

Method

This study employed a mixed methods approach to investigate how undergraduate law students with English as the medium of instruction perceive the impact of English proficiency on their career paths in law. By combining quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews, this approach allows researchers to identify common patterns while exploring students' personal narratives (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). These explanatory sequential mixed methods also strengthen the validity of findings through methodological triangulation.

The survey instrument was designed based on Karunaratne's (2014) framework, including Likert scales and multiple-choice questions to measure students' perceptions of English proficiency, perceived benefits for their legal careers, and the

challenges they face. Surveys were chosen because they are efficient in collecting large amounts of perceptual data. Semi-structured interviews were used as a complementary method to gain deeper insights. The interview guide was adapted from Lan (2022), allowing for open exploration of key topics that emerged in the survey. The semi-structured format was chosen because it is flexible yet focused. The survey and interview protocols were pilot-tested with five students to ensure clarity and reliability.

A total of 54 International Law students from Syiah Kuala University were selected using purposive sampling. This approach is considered effective in educational research as it allows for the selection of participants with relevant experience related to the research topic. Five participants were then purposively selected for interviews to represent diverse academic years and proficiency levels. Further, data analysis was conducted separately but complementarily. Survey data were analyzed using descriptive statistics to identify trends and distributions in students' perceptions (Rahman & Yuzar, 2020). Meanwhile, interview data were analyzed using a thematic approach, which allowed for the identification of main themes in participants' narratives (Christou, 2022).

These explanatory sequential mixed methods resulted in a more comprehensive understanding of how the use of English as the language of instruction shapes students' perceptions of their readiness to enter the legal profession. The survey findings generally describe students' perceptions of the importance of English proficiency, while the interviews explore their feelings of confidence, linguistic challenges, and career expectations influenced by their academic experiences in an English-speaking environment. To ensure the ethical consideration, ethical approval was obtained from the university research ethics committee, and participants provided informed consent before participation.

Results

A total of 54 students from the EMI International Class Program at the Law Faculty, Syiah Kuala University participated in the survey. Half of the respondents were

in their 2nd semester (50%), followed by the 6th semester (16.7%) and the 4th semester (13%). The rest came from other academic levels including the 1st, 3rd, and 8th semesters, each contributing between 1.9% to 3.7% of the sample. In terms of gender, 66.7% of participants were female, while 33.3% were male. Regarding self-assessed English proficiency, most students identified as intermediate (77.8%), with 14.8% considering themselves beginners, and only 7.4% identifying as advanced. When asked about the frequency of English use in academic or professional settings, 57.4% reported using English often, followed by 24.1% who used it sometimes, 13% who reported always, and a small portion who used it rarely (5.6%).

Table 1. General Perception of English and Career Benefits

Survey Statement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
Improving English proficiency could benefit my career	0%	0%	1.9%	9.3%	88.9%
Employers in my field consider English proficiency important	0%	0%	7.4%	50%	44.4%

Students displayed overwhelmingly positive perceptions of English proficiency as a valuable asset for their careers. Nearly 89% strongly agreed that improving their English would benefit their career, with another 9.3% agreeing. Only 1.9% selected Neutral, and none disagreed. Similarly, for the statement "Employers in my field consider English proficiency important," 44.4% strongly agreed and 50% agreed, making a combined 94.4% in favor. A small portion (7.4%) chose Neutral, and no students disagreed.

Further, in the following table, it shows that all students agreed that mastering English helps them get international jobs within Indonesia. A significant 74.1% strongly agreed, while 27.8% agreed, and no respondents selected Neutral, Disagree, or Strongly Disagree. For promotion opportunities, the majority were again in favor:

55.6% strongly agreed and 31.5% agreed, totaling 87.1% in agreement. However, 14.8% remained Neutral, suggesting that some students are unsure about the link between English skills and upward mobility within organizations. Nonetheless, no students disagreed with either statement, further confirming positive attitudes.

Table 2. English and Local/Regional Job Opportunities

Survey Statement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
Mastering English helps get international jobs in Indonesia	0%	0%	0%	27.8%	74.1%
Being proficient in English helps with job promotion	0%	0%	14.8%	31.5%	55.6%

Table 3. English and Global Job Opportunities

Survey Statement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
English helps obtain international jobs overseas	0%	1.9%	0%	18.5%	81.5%
English helps get jobs in English-speaking countries	0%	0%	0%	25.9%	75.9%

Students overwhelmingly agreed that English proficiency is essential for securing global career opportunities. Specifically, 81.5% of respondents strongly agreed that English helps in obtaining international jobs overseas, with an additional

18.5% agreeing. Only a small minority (1.9%) disagreed with this statement. Likewise, 75.9% of students strongly agreed that English proficiency facilitates obtaining jobs in English-speaking countries, while 25.9% agreed. There were no neutral or disagree responses for this item, reflecting a unanimous belief in the critical role of English in accessing global job markets.

Table 4. English Learning Experience and Challenges.

Survey Statement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
I have sufficient opportunities to practice English in my university courses	0%	0%	13%	50%	46.3%
English learning resources at my university are effective	0%	1.9%	20.4%	55.6%	27.8%
English as a medium of instruction is effective for my English learning at university	0%	0%	27.8%	46.3%	27.8%
I need extra English courses to help boost my English level	0%	0%	14.8%	38.9%	50%
I have sufficient opportunities to practice English in my university courses	0%	0%	13%	50%	46.3%

The majority of students reported positive experiences with English learning opportunities. Regarding opportunities to practice English in university courses, 50% <https://doi.org/10.35905/inspiring.v8i2.14076>

agreed and 46.3% strongly agreed that sufficient opportunities exist, while 13% remained neutral and no students disagreed. On the effectiveness of university learning resources, 55.6% agreed and 27.8% strongly agreed that these resources help improve their English skills. However, 20.4% were neutral and 1.9% disagreed. Concerning the use of English as a medium of instruction (EMI), 46.3% agreed and 27.8% strongly agreed it was effective for their English learning, while 27.8% were neutral. Finally, a majority of students expressed the need for additional support, with 50% strongly agreeing and 38.9% agreeing that extra English courses would help boost their skills. About 14.8% were neutral on this point, and none disagreed.

Semi-structured interview data from five students in the International Class (IC) of the Faculty of Law provides a rich qualitative snapshot of the dynamics of learning experiences in a program that uses English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI). The five participants shared diverse personal stories reflecting their academic journeys in navigating the complexities of EMI, which not only require mastery of legal content but also linguistic proficiency and adaptation to the unique academic culture. Their experiences span from initial enthusiasm driven by internal and external motivation to various challenges they faced both cognitively and emotionally.

Discussion

From the data analysis, four interrelated central themes were identified: motivation, expectations, struggles, and belief in the value of the EMI program. These four themes do not stand alone but form a network of meanings that describe the dynamics of student learning holistically. Their motivation, for example, is often framed by global aspirations and the desire to build higher cultural capital. However, these high expectations are often tested by linguistic challenges and resource limitations. Nevertheless, the students demonstrate the ability to persevere and adapt, reinforcing their belief that the program offers long-term value. A deeper analysis of these findings, drawing on theoretical concepts such as learning motivation, EMI challenges, and cultural capital, not only enriches our understanding of IC students'

experiences but also provides critical insights for the management and development of similar programs in the future.

One of the dominant reasons that students choose the International Class program is the appeal of obtaining “two benefits at once”: mastery of legal knowledge and improvement of English language skills. This reflects a strong instrumental motivation, where English is seen as a strategic tool for opening up access to international careers. Student A—“Why not choose something that offers two benefits at the same time?”—underscores the efficiency and added value of this dual learning approach (Lan, 2022; Li & Pei, 2024). Additionally, external influences such as teacher recommendations, previous positive experiences in learning English, and aspirations to pursue further studies abroad also play a significant role (Chang, 2023). This social support acts as a catalyst in the decision-making process, reinforcing students' belief in the relevance of the program.

Second, students enter the IC program with high expectations. They envision an elite academic environment, small, conducive classes, and consistent use of English in all aspects, including informal interactions with peers. There is an expectation of a “cosmopolitan” atmosphere similar to studying abroad. However, the reality they encounter is more complex. While English is used consistently in teaching and academic materials, Indonesian remains dominant in social conversations outside the classroom. Students recognize that these social practices reflect psychological comfort and social dynamics that are difficult to change through program policies alone. The gap between expectations and reality highlights the importance of understanding the limits of internationalization within a local context

Further, one of the greatest challenges that students face is the complexity of legal language in the EMI context. They identify difficulties in understanding legal texts laden with technical terms and complex sentence structures. Student C states, “Understanding the law in Indonesian is already difficult. Doing so in English is even more difficult.” In addition to passive comprehension, difficulties also arise in academic production, such as writing legal essays in formal English. However, instead of being overwhelmed by this burden, most students see these challenges as opportunities for

growth (Dearden, 2018). Student E emphasized that this is “an opportunity, not a challenge,” demonstrating a growth mindset and resilient coping strategies (Dahlan et al., 2024).

Furthermore, all participants consistently perceive English proficiency as an important investment for the future. The language is seen as the key to accessing international legal references, broader job opportunities, and further studies abroad. Student A referred to it as “the key to accessing better jobs,” while Student B considered it an important asset for postgraduate education. Even in local legal practice, Student E emphasized the importance of English in handling contracts with foreign companies or cross-border cases. This indicates that students do not merely view English as a technical skill but as Bourdieu’s cultural capital that can enhance their competitiveness in the global legal market (Xu & Hampden-, 2016).

These findings suggest that the International Class program cannot be understood solely as a space for learning a foreign language but also as a social arena where various identities, expectations, and local realities intersect (Yasim et al., 2024). Internationalization through EMI is not a linear or uniform process. Although the policy of using English is formally implemented, informal social practices remain heavily influenced by local culture and group dynamics. This underscores the importance of understanding EMI as a process of social and cultural adaptation, not merely a linguistic transformation (Yuzar, 2020).

From a program management perspective, these findings have several important implications. First, it is important to manage students' expectations from the outset by providing a realistic picture of the language ecosystem within the IC program. Second, specialized academic support must be provided, particularly in mastering legal vocabulary and academic writing skills. Workshops, language tutors, and legal terminology glossaries can serve as strategic interventions. Third, encouraging the use of English outside the classroom can be achieved through informal social and academic activities such as debate clubs, film discussions, or English-language zones.

Conclusion

This study reveals that International Class students at the Faculty of Law are driven by strong instrumental motivation for “dual benefits” and a deep belief in the value of English as educational capital for global careers. Despite facing significant challenges in mastering technical legal language through EMI and experiencing a gap between expectations of total immersion and the reality of using their mother tongue in socialization, they demonstrate resilience by viewing difficulties as opportunities for growth. The belief in the high relevance of their careers serves as a strong motivator. The success of such programs does not only depend on the use of English as the medium of instruction but also on sufficient academic-linguistic support, realistic expectation management, and active efforts to strengthen the connection between classroom learning and the demands of the global legal profession. However, a key limitation of this research is its narrow focus on participants from a specific field at a single university which may not fully capture the broader range of EMI experiences in other context or academic fields. For future research, longitudinal studies would be valuable in assessing how students' perceptions and professional outcomes evolve over time, especially comparative approach across institutions or countries. Further investigation into the role of institutional support structures, such as legal English training and mentorship, could also enhance understanding of how EMI programs can be optimized in specialized fields such as law.

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