Negotiating Learner Agency in AI-Supported Legal English Instruction: Implications for Language for Specific Purposes Pedagogy

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Abstract: This study investigates how artificial intelligence (AI) applications shape learner agency in the context of Legal English instruction. While AI has been widely integrated into language learning, its use in specialized domains such as Legal English remains underexplored. Legal English, being a domain-specific register characterized by precise terminology, complex syntax, and professional communicative conventions, requires learners not only to acquire linguistic knowledge but also to develop critical judgment and agency. Drawing on qualitative inquiry, this research examines how learners of Legal English exercise agency when engaging with AI-supported learning platforms. The study focused on postgraduate law students enrolled in a Legal English course that employed AI-driven tools such as machine translation, intelligent writing assistants, and automated feedback systems. Findings suggest that AI support both enables and constrains learner agency: while it empowers learners to independently draft, revise, and evaluate legal texts, it also creates dependencies that may weaken critical thinking if not mediated by pedagogical scaffolding. The study contributes to ongoing debates on the pedagogical role of AI in language teaching for specific purposes (LSP), highlighting that fostering learner agency requires balancing AI's efficiency with opportunities for reflection, negotiation of meaning, and critical evaluation.

Keywords: Learner agency; Legal English; Artificial intelligence; Language for Specific Purposes (LSP); Qualitative study

Contextualizing Legal English and the Centrality of Learner Agency

Language for Specific Purposes (LSP) has grown into a well-established field within applied linguistics over the past fifty years, evolving from niche initiatives designed to support professional language learning into a broad interdisciplinary enterprise that informs curriculum design, testing, and pedagogy across disciplines. At its core, LSP recognizes that language is not a neutral medium but a resource shaped by institutional practices, disciplinary norms, and professional communities. Thus, it is not enough for learners to master general communicative competence; they must also acquire the discursive, lexical, and pragmatic repertoires specific to their chosen field of practice. This recognition is particularly acute in the domain of law, where the medium of Legal English functions not only as a vehicle for communication but as a constitutive element of legal practice itself. In contracts, judgments, statutes, and courtroom exchanges, the use of precise terminology and conventionalized syntactic structures does more than express ideasit performs legally binding acts.

The rise of English as a global lingua franca in international trade and arbitration has magnified the importance of Legal English. Law students and professionals across the globe are increasingly required to produce and interpret legal texts in English even when it is not their first language. In arbitration proceedings, multinational corporate transactions, cross-border litigation, and transnational regulatory environments, English serves as the default medium of communication. This shift has profound implications for pedagogy. Learners must not only understand technical terminology but also acquire competence in deploying discourse structures that align with professional norms. As Mattila (2013) observes, Legal English today functions as a "bridge language" between diverse legal traditions, enabling lawyers trained in civil law and common law systems to communicate effectively. Yet, the very features that give Legal English its precision and authority also render it opaque to learners. The archaism of its vocabulary, the density of its syntax, and the ritualized nature of its genres combine to create barriers that require systematic pedagogical intervention.

Legal English cannot be taught in the same way as general English. While vocabulary acquisition, grammar drills, and communicative practice remain relevant, they are insufficient for preparing learners to function in legal contexts. What is needed is an approach that emphasizes authenticity, critical engagement, and the development of professional literacy. Authenticity here refers not only to exposure to real legal texts but also to immersion in tasks that replicate professional practices: drafting clauses, interpreting statutes, preparing case briefs, and engaging in moot court simulations. Critical engagement entails the ability to evaluate texts, identify ambiguities, and challenge interpretations. Professional literacy involves understanding how language operates as a tool of legal reasoning and persuasion. Each of these dimension's points toward the central importance of learner agency in Legal English pedagogy.

Agency is a concept that has attracted increasing attention within applied linguistics and educational theory more broadly. Traditionally associated with autonomy, self-direction, and learner responsibility, agency has been redefined in recent decades through sociocultural and ecological perspectives. Van Lier (2008) describes agency as the ability to perceive and act upon affordances in the environment. Learners demonstrate agency not simply by working independently but by identifying opportunities, making informed decisions, and exercising judgment in context. From this perspective, agency is relational: it arises from the interaction of learners with tools, peers, teachers, and institutions. It is not an innate trait but an emergent property of situated activity. Murray (2014) develops this insight further, emphasizing that agency is dynamic, negotiated, and context-dependent. Toohey and Norton (2003) add a poststructuralist dimension, highlighting the ways in which learners resist, appropriate, or contest the identities and roles made available to them.

In the Legal English classroom, agency acquires distinctive salience. Learners are preparing for professional contexts where linguistic choices carry material consequences. Drafting a clause incorrectly may alter contractual obligations. Misinterpreting statutory language may compromise a legal argument. In such environments, agency involves more than autonomy; it requires critical reflection, responsibility, and the ability to anticipate the implications of language use. Gao (2010) argues that in LSP contexts, learners must demonstrate agency by selecting resources, appropriating discourse conventions, and applying them to professional problem-solving tasks. In Legal English, this includes the capacity to adapt formulaic expressions to new contexts, to evaluate whether AI-generated suggestions are legally appropriate, and to justify one's linguistic decisions in collaborative tasks. Agency is thus both a pedagogical goal and a professional necessity.

The urgency of developing agency in Legal English has been heightened by the advent of artificial intelligence in education. AI tools have proliferated in recent years, offering learners new ways to engage with language. Machine translation engines, intelligent writing assistants, automated feedback systems, and AI-driven legal research platforms promise to make learning more efficient and more personalized. Proponents highlight the benefits: learners can draft documents independently, receive immediate feedback, and access resources that would otherwise be unavailable. Studies of AI in general language learning report increased learner confidence, reduced anxiety, and greater willingness to experiment. Wang and Chen (2020) found that speech recognition tools enabled shy learners to practice pronunciation privately, thereby lowering barriers to participation. Han and Hyland (2019) reported that automated writing evaluators encouraged learners to redraft texts multiple times, supporting iterative learning.

Yet, these benefits conceal risks. Godwin-Jones (2020) cautions that the efficiency of AI may promote shallow engagement: learners may accept corrections without internalizing underlying rules. Floridi and Cowls (2019) warn that AI systems reflect the

biases of their training data, which may lead to inappropriate or inaccurate suggestions. In Legal English, these dangers are magnified. A mistranslation of force majeure, a mis-specified contractual term, or an overly colloquial phrase in a legal letter may have consequences far beyond the classroom. Preliminary studies confirm this tension. Perez (2021) observed that law students using machine translation tools often accepted outputs uncritically, incorporating errors into drafts. Kjær (2007) noted that legal concepts rarely map neatly across languages, making AI translations especially unreliable. At the same time, Ashley (2017) showed that AI-driven legal research tools, while efficient, may discourage learners from developing interpretive reasoning skills. These findings highlight the paradoxical role of AI: it has the potential both to empower and to constrain learner agency.

Against this backdrop, the present study positions learner agency as the central lens for analyzing AI-supported Legal English instruction. While the literature on learner agency is extensive, and the research on AI in language education is growing, there is little scholarship at their intersection within the specialized domain of law. Most studies of AI in education focus on general English learners or on higher education broadly, not on the unique challenges of Legal English. Similarly, most work on learner agency has examined classrooms where technology is supplementary rather than constitutive of the learning process. By contrast, Legal English today is increasingly mediated by AI tools that are integral to professional practice. Lawyers already rely on AI for research, drafting, and translation. Law students therefore need not only to master Legal English but also to develop the capacity to engage critically with AI.

This study therefore seeks to address three interrelated research questions: How does AI support influence learner agency in Legal English instruction? What opportunities and challenges do learners encounter when working with AI tools? And how might pedagogy be designed to ensure that AI fosters rather than diminishes critical skills? These questions are not only of academic interest but of practical importance. The answers will inform how Legal English is taught in universities, how law students are prepared for professional practice, and how the integration of AI into education can be managed responsibly.

By situating the inquiry within the broader field of LSP, grounding it in theories of learner agency, and focusing on the distinctive challenges of Legal English, this study contributes to three overlapping domains of scholarship. Theoretically, it extends the concept of learner agency into AI-supported LSP contexts, highlighting its dynamic and negotiated character. Empirically, it documents how postgraduate law students experience the affordances and constraints of AI in their Legal English learning. Pedagogically, it offers strategies for integrating AI in ways that balance efficiency with critical reflection, independence with collaboration, and technological affordances with professional responsibility. In doing so, it seeks to advance ongoing debates about the

role of AI in education and about the future of LSP pedagogy in a digital age where law, language, and technology increasingly intersect.

Learner Experiences in AI-Mediated Legal English Instruction

The findings of this inquiry emerge from close attention to how postgraduate law students experienced the integration of AI into a Legal English course. While quantitative approaches often emphasize performance gains measured by accuracy or test scores, the aim here is different: to examine the dynamics of agency as expressed in learners' narratives, practices, and reflections. The analysis therefore focuses on themes that capture the paradoxical interplay between empowerment and dependency, between reflection and passivity, and between individual and collaborative agency. In presenting these themes, the goal is not to offer statistical generalizations but to develop a thick description (Geertz, 1973) of learner experiences that illuminates how AI mediates agency in the specialized domain of Legal English.

Empowerment through AI Tools

One of the strongest themes that surfaced was the sense of empowerment that learners derived from AI tools. Several participants described AI as offering them confidence to experiment with drafting contracts, case briefs, or opinion letters without the constant fear of making uncorrectable mistakes. One student, reflecting on her use of an AI writing assistant, noted: "I felt like I could try writing longer clauses because the system would guide me. It was like having a tutor always present." This metaphor of AI as a private tutor recurred in multiple accounts. Students valued the immediacy of feedback, the possibility of revising repeatedly, and the sense of independence it created.

For learners accustomed to teacher-cantered instruction, the shift was profound. In traditional Legal English classes, students often hesitated to attempt drafting until they felt confident, fearing correction. With AI, however, they could draft early and refine iteratively. This iterative process reinforced their sense of control. One student recounted drafting three versions of a confidentiality clause, each time integrating AI's grammatical suggestions but also experimenting with alternative formulations. She observed: "It gave me the freedom to try, fail, and try again without embarrassment." This capacity to experiment illustrates agency as risk-taking and reflectiondimensions often suppressed in high-stakes professional education.

The empowerment extended beyond language mechanics. Learners reported using AI to access legal terminology across jurisdictions. For instance, when confronted with the challenge of translating the Indian legal concept of public interest litigation into English suitable for an international audience, students experimented with AI translation tools but then cross-checked outputs against online case law. The process allowed them to situate terminology in context, enhancing their discursive competence. Here, AI served

not merely as a corrective device but as a gateway to authentic resources, expanding learners' access to the professional discourse community.

The Risk of Over-Dependence

The same tools that empowered learners also created risks of dependency. A number of students admitted to relying heavily on AI suggestions, often accepting them uncritically. In one case, a learner recounted drafting a force majeure clause with AI assistance. The tool translated the term as "uncontrollable power," which the learner incorporated into the contract. While syntactically fluent, the phrase was legally inaccurate, as force majeure refers specifically to unforeseeable external events that relieve parties from contractual obligations. When asked later, the learner reflected: "It looked correct and I did not think further." This illustrates a moment when agency was ceded to the machine, resulting in the erosion of professional responsibility.

Such incidents were not isolated. Several learners confessed that when under time pressure, they accepted AI revisions wholesale. One observed: "It saves time to just accept all the red lines instead of checking each one." The danger here is clear: efficiency displaces reflection, and learners risk equating AI authority with correctness. The paradox is that the very efficiency that empowers learners can also undermine the critical engagement that defines agency.

The risk of dependency was particularly pronounced with translation tools. Learners using machine translation often assumed equivalence between terms without considering cultural or jurisdictional differences. For example, a participant reported translating the Hindi legal term nyay panchayat (village-level dispute resolution council) simply as "court," thereby erasing its cultural specificity. This tendency reflects what Pennycook (1994) calls the danger of treating language as transparent rather than socially situated. In such cases, learners' agency was constrained by the seductive fluency of AI outputs.

Critical Reflection and Negotiation

While some learners lapsed into passivity, others engaged AI outputs critically, using them as springboards for reflection and negotiation. In classroom discussions, these students often positioned AI suggestions as hypotheses to be tested against authoritative sources. One group debated whether AI's suggestion of "terminate the agreement" adequately conveyed the legal nuance required in a case of misrepresentation. After consulting textbooks and precedents, they decided that "rescind the agreement" was the more precise choice. In reflecting on the episode, a learner remarked: "The AI was useful to start with, but the real learning came from discussing why it was not enough."

This form of engagement exemplifies agency as evaluation and negotiation. Learners did not accept outputs passively but interrogated them, compared them with authentic

legal sources, and collaboratively decided on alternatives. Importantly, the process of negotiation itself deepened their understanding of legal discourse. As one student observed: "We had to justify our choice, and in doing so, I understood the difference between cancel, terminate, and rescind much better."

These instances highlight the pedagogical potential of AI as a catalyst for reflection rather than a substitute for reasoning. When framed in this way, AI enhances rather than diminishes agency, prompting learners to take ownership of their decisions.

Collaboration and Shared Agency

Another striking finding was that AI could foster not only individual but also collective agency. In group tasks, learners often used AI outputs as starting points for debate. One group working on a non-disclosure agreement reviewed an AI-generated clause and immediately began discussing whether the phrasing adequately balanced confidentiality with exceptions for legal disclosure. The debate was animated, with students citing case law, textbooks, and professional practice. In the end, they substantially revised the clause, but they credited AI with "giving us something to argue with."

Such moments illustrate that agency is not only an individual capacity but also a distributed property of collaborative practice (Reinders & Benson, 2017). Learners exercised agency by engaging in collective decision-making, defending positions, and negotiating meaning. The AI output functioned as a trigger for dialogue, but the agency resided in the group's deliberations. This aligns with the professional reality of law, where drafting and negotiation are rarely solitary acts but collaborative endeavours.

Unequal Agency and Digital Literacy

The findings also reveal disparities in how learners engaged with AI, shaped by differences in digital literacy. Students who were adept at navigating advanced features of AI tools—such as customizing writing assistant preferences or using bilingual corpora—exercised greater control over outputs and displayed stronger agency. By contrast, learners less familiar with technology often felt overwhelmed, relying passively on default suggestions. One student confessed: "I didn't know how to make the software show legal phrases, so I just accepted what it gave." This unevenness suggests that agency is mediated not only by pedagogy but also by access to digital literacies.

The implications are significant. If not addressed, AI integration risks widening gaps between learners, privileging the digitally literate and marginalizing others. Pedagogical scaffolding must therefore include explicit training in digital literacy, ensuring that all learners can engage critically and equitably with AI tools.

Emotional Dimensions of Agency

Beyond cognitive and technical aspects, the findings underscore the emotional dimensions of learner agency. Several students reported that AI reduced their anxiety,

serving as a "first reader" before they exposed their drafts to peers or teachers. This effect encouraged participation from students who were otherwise hesitant to contribute. At the same time, others described frustration when AI outputs failed to capture legal nuance, leaving them uncertain about whether to trust their own judgment. These affective responses highlight that agency is not purely rational but bound up with learners' confidence, identity, and sense of legitimacy.

Emerging Ethical Awareness

Finally, some learners began to articulate ethical concerns. In discussing their reliance on AI, a few questioned whether it was legitimate to use AI extensively in academic tasks. One student remarked: "If we use AI to draft everything, are we really learning to be lawyers?" Another worried about the possibility of plagiarism or over-reliance. These reflections indicate that learners were beginning to engage not only with the linguistic and professional dimensions of AI but also with its ethical implications. Such awareness is itself a form of agency, as learners position themselves in relation to broader debates about academic integrity and professional responsibility.

Synthesis of Findings

The analysis reveals that learner agency in AI-mediated Legal English instruction is dynamic and multifaceted. AI empowers learners by reducing anxiety, enabling iterative drafting, and expanding access to resources. At the same time, it risks fostering dependency when learners accept outputs uncritically. The strongest expressions of agency occurred when learners engaged critically with AI suggestions, used them as starting points for reflection, and negotiated alternatives collaboratively. However, disparities in digital literacy mediated access to agency, and learners' emotional and ethical responses further shaped their engagement.

Overall, the findings confirm the paradox identified in the literature: AI has the potential both to enhance and to constrain agency. The key determinant is not the technology itself but the ways in which learners and teachers frame its use. When AI is positioned as a tool for dialogue, hypothesis-testing, and negotiation, it supports agency. When it is treated as an authority, it undermines it.

Discussion: Reimagining Pedagogy at the Intersection of AI, Agency, and Legal English

The findings presented earlier demonstrate that learner agency in AI-supported Legal English instruction is complex, paradoxical, and deeply contingent. While learners often experienced empowerment through access to immediate feedback, opportunities for iterative drafting, and expanded resources, they also faced risks of dependency, superficial engagement, and digital inequality. These tensions resonate with but also extend existing theories of autonomy, sociocultural agency, and digital pedagogy. In this discussion, I will interpret the findings through the lens of broader scholarship,

interrogating how they advance theoretical understandings of learner agency, how they complicate debates about AI in education, and what they suggest for the pedagogy of Legal English and other LSP domains.

Theoretical Implications for Learner Agency

One of the strongest contributions of this study lies in its affirmation of agency as an emergent, relational phenomenon rather than an individual trait. Consistent with van Lier's (2008) ecological model, learners exercised agency not simply by making choices but by perceiving and acting upon affordances presented by AI tools, peers, and tasks. For instance, the decision to critically evaluate an AI translation of force majeure was not an isolated act of independence but the result of recognizing a discrepancy, mobilizing resources, and negotiating alternatives collaboratively. Such episodes underscore that agency is enacted through relationships—with tools, texts, and communities—rather than residing solely within individuals.

At the same time, the findings complicate sociocultural and poststructuralist theories by demonstrating how technology itself becomes an actor in the ecology of agency. AI tools did not simply mediate human action; they actively shaped the conditions under which learners could perceive and act upon affordances. The seductive fluency of machine translation outputs, for example, constrained learners' perception of alternatives, while the immediate corrections offered by writing assistants encouraged experimentation. In this sense, AI introduced new forms of mediation that both enabled and restricted agency. This highlights the need to extend ecological and sociocultural theories of agency to account for the agency-shaping role of intelligent technologies, which are not neutral but actively structure possibilities for action.

Furthermore, the findings resonate with Norton's (2013) notion of investment by showing that learners' agency was intertwined with their professional identities. For law students, the stakes of Legal English were not merely academic but tied to future careers. As one student asked, "If we use AI to draft everything, are we really learning to be lawyers?" Such reflections reveal that learners' engagement with AI was not only about efficiency or accuracy but about legitimacy, authority, and professional identity. Exercising agency thus required learners to position themselves in relation to AI, deciding what kind of legal professionals they wished to become.

Rethinking AI in Language Education

The findings also shed light on the broader debates about AI in education. Much of the literature has oscillated between enthusiasm for AI's efficiency and skepticism about its risks. On the one hand, scholars highlight personalization, immediacy, and confidence-building (Chou et al., 2021; Wang & Chen, 2020). On the other hand, they warn of dependency, bias, and superficiality (Godwin-Jones, 2020; Floridi& Cowls, 2019). This study suggests that both positions are valid but incomplete, as they overlook the

mediating role of agency. AI is neither inherently empowering nor inherently constraining. Rather, its impact depends on whether learners engage with it critically and whether pedagogy encourages such engagement.

In this respect, the study contributes to a shift from viewing AI as a tool that delivers learning to viewing it as a partner in meaning-making. AI outputs should not be seen as answers but as prompts—starting points for reflection, comparison, and negotiation. When learners interrogated AI translations, debated contract clauses, and justified revisions, they transformed AI into a resource for agency. Conversely, when learners accepted AI outputs uncritically, they ceded agency to the machine. The pedagogical task, therefore, is to design environments where AI serves as a catalyst for reflection rather than an authority to be obeyed.

Another implication concerns digital literacy. The unevenness observed in learners' engagement underscores that AI integration cannot assume homogeneity of skills. Some learners exercised sophisticated control over AI tools, while others struggled with basic functionalities. This disparity magnified differences in agency, reinforcing Zawacki-Richter et al.'s (2019) warning about digital divides. Pedagogy must therefore address not only language literacy but also digital literacy, equipping learners with the critical awareness to evaluate AI outputs, recognize limitations, and use tools strategically. Without such scaffolding, AI may exacerbate inequalities rather than fostering equitable empowerment.

Legal English Pedagogy in the Age of AI

The domain of Legal English magnifies these theoretical and pedagogical issues because of its high-stakes nature. Unlike general English learning, where errors may be tolerated, mistakes in legal language can carry professional and even legal consequences. The mistranslation of a clause, the misuse of a legal term, or the adoption of a colloquial phrase in a formal document can undermine contracts, arguments, or professional credibility. In this context, the risk of over-dependence on AI is particularly dangerous. Learners who uncritically accept machine suggestions may produce texts that are fluent but legally invalid.

At the same time, the findings show that Legal English pedagogy can harness AI productively if it is framed as a scaffold for critical engagement. Group discussions of AI-generated outputs, for example, encouraged learners to debate precision, appropriateness, and jurisdictional nuance. These tasks not only developed linguistic competence but also simulated professional practices of negotiation, review, and justification. In this way, AI became a pedagogical trigger for collaboration, fostering both individual and collective agency.

The findings also highlight the importance of integrating intercultural awareness into AI-supported Legal English pedagogy. Learners translating culturally specific terms such as nyay panchayat faced challenges that AI tools could not resolve. Critical reflection

and discussion were necessary to capture the cultural and legal specificity of the term. This underscores that AI cannot substitute for intercultural competence. Instead, it must be complemented by pedagogy that foregrounds the situatedness of legal discourse across jurisdictions.

Paradoxes of Efficiency and Depth

A recurring theme in the findings is the paradox between efficiency and depth. Learners appreciated AI for its efficiency: it saved time, reduced anxiety, and provided immediate corrections. Yet, the same efficiency sometimes discouraged deeper engagement. Accepting all AI "red lines" without reflection was faster but undermined critical reasoning. This paradox illustrates the tension between surface-level fluency and deeper professional literacy.

The challenge for pedagogy is to reconcile these competing tendencies. One approach is to design tasks where efficiency is not the endpoint but the starting point. For example, learners might be asked to accept AI outputs initially but then to identify limitations, compare alternatives, and revise critically. In this way, efficiency becomes a means to deeper engagement rather than a substitute for it.

Policy and Institutional Implications

Beyond the classroom, the findings raise questions for institutions and policy-makers. Universities integrating AI into curricula must consider not only the availability of tools but also the pedagogical frameworks that govern their use. Without explicit guidance, learners may default to uncritical acceptance, undermining both academic integrity and professional preparation. Policies should therefore emphasize the responsible use of AI, integrating it into learning outcomes that foreground critical reflection, collaboration, and professional responsibility.

At the same time, access and equity must be addressed. If some learners have access to advanced AI tools while others do not, disparities in agency will widen. Institutions should strive to ensure equitable access and provide training in digital literacy as a core component of professional education. In Legal English programs, this means not only teaching the language of law but also equipping learners with the skills to navigate the technological tools that increasingly mediate legal practice.

Reimagining Pedagogy

Taken together, the findings point toward a reimagined pedagogy of Legal English in the age of AI. Such a pedagogy would integrate AI not as a shortcut to efficiency but as a scaffold for reflection, negotiation, and collaboration. It would embed tasks that require learners to interrogate AI outputs, to justify revisions, and to compare alternatives with authentic texts. It would design group activities that simulate professional practices, using AI as a catalyst for dialogue rather than as a substitute for reasoning. It would

explicitly teach digital literacy, ensuring that all learners can engage critically with AI tools. And it would cultivate intercultural awareness, highlighting the limitations of AI in capturing culturally specific legal concepts.

Most importantly, such a pedagogy would place learner agency at its centre. Rather than asking whether AI improves accuracy, the key question becomes: does AI enhance or constrain learners' capacity to act intentionally, reflect critically, and assume responsibility for their linguistic and professional choices? By foregrounding this question, Legal English instruction can navigate the paradox of AI's affordances and limitations, ensuring that learners emerge not as passive consumers of machine outputs but as active, critical, and responsible professionals.

Conclusion and Pedagogical Implications

The integration of artificial intelligence into Legal English pedagogy compels educators and researchers alike to grapple with profound questions about the relationship between technology, learning, and professional responsibility. This study has sought to examine these questions through the lens of learner agency, exploring how postgraduate law students experienced AI-supported instruction and how their agency was enhanced, constrained, or reconfigured in the process. The findings demonstrate that AI is neither a panacea nor a peril in itself but a force that reshapes the ecology of learning in ways that simultaneously empower and endanger agency. In this concluding section, I synthesize the study's insights, situate them within broader debates in applied linguistics and educational technology, and outline pedagogical and institutional implications, while also identifying limitations and directions for future research.

Revisiting the Paradox of AI and Agency

Perhaps the most striking insight from this study is the paradoxical role of AI in shaping learner agency. On one side, AI afforded learners unprecedented opportunities for independence. The immediacy of feedback from intelligent writing assistants, the accessibility of legal terminology across jurisdictions, and the ability to experiment with drafting without fear of embarrassment collectively empowered learners to take risks, refine their writing iteratively, and expand their engagement with authentic discourse. Agency was expressed herein learners' confidence, experimentation, and willingness to assume responsibility for their texts.

On the other side, AI also encouraged forms of dependency that weakened agency. Learners who uncritically accepted AI-generated translations or corrections ceded judgment to the machine, thereby undermining the critical reflection that is indispensable in professional legal contexts. Agency, in these moments, was displaced rather than exercised. The paradox, therefore, is not that AI inherently fosters or diminishes agency, but that its impact depends on how learners position themselves in relation to it and how pedagogy frames its use.

This paradox resonates with but also extends theoretical debates in applied linguistics. It confirms van Lier's (2008) insight that agency is relational and context-dependent, while also highlighting the active role of technology in shaping learners' perceptions of affordances. It echoes Norton's (2013) argument that agency is tied to identity and investment, as learners' engagement with AI was mediated by their aspirations to be competent, responsible legal professionals. In extending these debates, the study shows that agency in AI-supported contexts must be understood as a negotiation between human learners and intelligent technologies, mediated by pedagogy and institutional structures.

Contributions to Applied Linguistics and LSP

The study contributes to applied linguistics in several ways. First, it extends the concept of learner agency into AI-mediated LSP contexts, demonstrating that agency cannot be fully understood without considering the role of intelligent technologies that both enable and constrain action. Second, it highlights the distinctive challenges of Legal English, where linguistic errors carry professional consequences, thereby magnifying the stakes of agency. Third, it offers empirical evidence of how learners negotiate agency in practice, showing that critical reflection, collaborative negotiation, and digital literacy are key factors in determining whether AI supports or undermines learning.

For LSP research more broadly, the findings underscore that specialized domains demand not only language knowledge but also professional literacy. Learner agency in LSP contexts is not simply about making choices but about making choices that align with disciplinary norms and professional responsibilities. This insight invites LSP scholarship to integrate theories of agency more explicitly into pedagogy and assessment, recognizing that professional competence includes the ability to evaluate and adapt technologies as well as texts.

Pedagogical Implications

The pedagogical implications of these findings are multifaceted. They concern not only classroom practice but also curriculum design, teacher training, and institutional policy.

First, AI must be framed as a scaffold for reflection, not as an authority. Teachers should design tasks that require learners to interrogate AI outputs, compare them with authentic legal texts, and justify revisions. For example, rather than simply accepting AI's translation of a contract clause, learners might be asked to evaluate its adequacy in light of statutory definitions and precedents. Such tasks transform AI from a provider of answers into a stimulus for critical engagement.

Second, collaborative tasks should be integrated to foster shared agency. The findings show that learners exercised agency most productively when debating AI outputs in groups, defending positions, and negotiating meaning. Such activities not only deepen understanding of legal discourse but also mirror professional practices of drafting,

review, and negotiation. Pedagogy should therefore embed AI in group tasks that simulate the realities of legal work.

Third, digital literacy must be taught explicitly. Disparities in learners' ability to navigate AI tools resulted in unequal opportunities for agency. Curriculum design should therefore include instruction on how to use AI tools critically and strategically. This includes understanding the limitations of machine translation, recognizing biases in AI outputs, and developing strategies for verifying accuracy. Such training prepares learners not only for academic success but also for professional environments where AI is increasingly embedded.

Fourth, intercultural awareness should be emphasized. Legal English is not uniform but shaped by diverse legal traditions. AI tools often fail to capture cultural and jurisdictional nuances, making intercultural competence essential. Pedagogy should therefore include comparative tasks where learners analyze how legal concepts are expressed across systems and how AI handles (or mishandles) these differences.

Fifth, affective dimensions of learning must be acknowledged. Learners' narratives revealed that AI reduced anxiety for some but generated frustration for others. Teachers should be sensitive to these emotional dynamics, creating spaces for reflection on how AI influences learners' confidence, identity, and sense of legitimacy. Such reflection reinforces agency by making learners conscious of their positioning.

Institutional and Policy-Level Implications

At the institutional level, universities and law schools must develop policies that support responsible AI integration. This includes ensuring equitable access to AI tools, providing training in digital literacy, and establishing guidelines for ethical use. Without such measures, disparities in access and understanding may widen, reinforcing inequities. Institutions should also recognize that AI use is not a temporary trend but an enduring feature of professional practice. Preparing students for this reality requires embedding AI literacy into curricula across disciplines, not only in Legal English but in all areas of professional education.

Policy-makers, likewise, must address broader questions of equity, integrity, and accountability. How should academic institutions regulate the use of AI in assignments and examinations? How can professional bodies ensure that reliance on AI does not undermine legal accountability? How can curricula balance efficiency with the cultivation of deep critical skills? These are urgent questions that extend beyond pedagogy to the governance of higher education and professional certification.

Limitations of the Study

No study is without limitations, and acknowledging them is crucial for situating findings. This inquiry focused on a single cohort of postgraduate law students in one institutional context. The experiences of these learners may not represent those of students in other

cultural, legal, or educational settings. Further, while the study drew on learners' narratives and classroom practices, it did not include longitudinal data that might capture how agency evolves over time. Nor did it examine teachers' perspectives in depth, which could provide further insights into the pedagogical mediation of AI.

Additionally, the study did not address in detail the specific technical features of different AI tools. Variations in tool design—such as the transparency of feedback, the adaptability of suggestions, or the capacity to access legal corpora—likely shape learner experiences in significant ways. Future research could compare how different AI platforms mediate agency, providing a more nuanced understanding of technological affordances and constraints.

Directions for Future Research

Building on these limitations, future research could pursue several directions. Longitudinal studies are needed to explore how learner agency develops over time in AI-supported Legal English courses. Do learners become more critical as they gain experience, or does dependency increase with convenience? Comparative studies across legal systems and cultural contexts could investigate how learners navigate the intercultural challenges of AI-mediated translation and drafting. Experimental studies could examine how different pedagogical framings of AI influence learner agency, testing the hypothesis that tasks emphasizing reflection and negotiation enhance agency more effectively than tasks emphasizing efficiency.

Beyond Legal English, similar inquiries could be extended to other LSP domains such as Medical English, Business English, or Aviation English, where professional consequences are equally high. Each domain may present unique challenges and affordances, but the underlying question of how AI influences learner agency is likely to resonate across contexts.

Finally, interdisciplinary research involving applied linguistics, legal studies, and artificial intelligence could provide richer insights into how professional discourses are being reshaped by intelligent technologies. Such collaboration could contribute not only to pedagogy but also to the design of AI tools themselves, ensuring that they support critical engagement rather than superficial compliance.

Final Reflections

In conclusion, this study highlights both the promise and the peril of AI in Legal English instruction. AI tools empower learners by providing immediate feedback, reducing anxiety, and enabling independent practice. Yet they also risk undermining agency when learners accept outputs uncritically or lack the digital literacy to engage strategically. The paradox is that AI can simultaneously strengthen and weaken learner agency, depending on how it is used.

The task for pedagogy is therefore not to reject AI, nor to embrace it uncritically, but to integrate it thoughtfully, with agency at the centre. By framing AI as a scaffold for reflection, embedding it in collaborative tasks, teaching digital literacy, and cultivating intercultural awareness, educators can ensure that learners develop not only linguistic proficiency but also the professional competence to use AI responsibly. For law students, this means preparing not only to draft fluent legal texts but also to exercise judgment, reflection, and responsibility in an era where technology is inseparable from practice.

In a broader sense, the findings call for a reimagining of education in the age of intelligent technologies. AI will continue to reshape how we learn, work, and communicate. The challenge is to ensure that it enhances rather than diminishes our capacity for critical thought, reflection, and responsible action. For Legal English pedagogy, this means anchoring instruction in learner agency, ensuring that the future lawyers, judges, and policy-makers trained today become not passive consumers of machine outputs but active, critical, and responsible professionals.

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