APPLYING THE CONTENT AND LANGUAGE INTEGRATED LEARNING (CLIL) APPROACH TO TEACHING LEGAL ENGLISH: CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS

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Abstract: *Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) is increasingly being adopted in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) instruction, aiming to simultaneously develop learners' specialized knowledge and language skills. While research exists regarding the effectiveness of CLIL in ESP, studies addressing the specific challenges and solutions associated with applying CLIL to Legal English instruction in Vietnam remain limited. This paper examines the difficulties encountered when implementing this approach at law training institutions in Vietnam, focusing primarily on faculty competence, teaching materials, assessment methods, and students' foreign language proficiency. Based on this analysis, the author proposes solutions to address these challenges, prioritizing the implementation of a co-teaching model. The arguments presented serve as a basis for academic discussion and provide a theoretical reference for law training institutions in Vietnam to conduct future quantitative research.*

Keywords: *CLIL method, Legal English, legal education, specialized knowledge, language skills*

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I. INTRODUCTION

In the current era of extensive international integration, higher education in Vietnam faces a mandate for comprehensive reform to meet the demand for high-quality human resources and to elevate higher education institutions into centers of research and innovation, in line with the spirit of Resolution No. 71-NQ/TW (dated August 22, 2025) of the Politburo regarding breakthroughs in the development of education and training. The Prime Minister also issued Decision No. 2371/QĐ-TTg (dated October 27, 2025) approving the scheme "Making English a second language in schools for the 2025–2035 period, with a vision toward 2045," which necessitates the creation of an effective English-use environment for teaching specialized courses. With the goal of training high-quality legal professionals capable of meeting the country's current international integration requirements, selecting a pedagogical approach that simultaneously imparts legal knowledge and develops learners' English proficiency is a pressing necessity.

Globally, various methods have been researched and employed in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) instruction to enhance learner proficiency. Recently, the Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) method has been adopted by many legal education institutions to simultaneously develop learners' specialized knowledge and language skills, rather than treating them separately as in traditional ESP models (Coyle et al., 2010). In Vietnam, studies at higher education institutions have reported positive results from applying the CLIL method to the teaching of Legal English, specifically regarding the enhancement of students' legal reasoning, learning motivation, and language skills (Nhac, 2023; Bui & Vu, 2024). This approach is considered suitable for helping law students adapt to an increasingly internationalized environment and develop both their professional knowledge and language proficiency comprehensively.

However, the implementation of CLIL in Legal English instruction at Vietnamese law schools remains limited. This article outlines the theoretical basis of the CLIL method and analyzes its suitability for teaching Legal English; it also identifies challenges associated with applying CLIL in Vietnamese law schools and offers constructive recommendations. The article reflects the author's personal perspective and requires further validation through future quantitative research.

II. THEORETICAL BASIS OF CONTENT AND LANGUAGE INTEGRATED LEARNING (CLIL)

Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) is a pedagogical approach in which a foreign language serves as the medium for teaching a non-language subject. This method integrates the development of subject-specific knowledge with language development (Marsh, 2000; Ruiz de Zarobe, 2025). In practice, this means learners study a subject in a language

other than their mother tongue—in this article, that language is English. The CLIL approach integrates the teaching of subject-specific content through a second language; this enables learners to grasp the subject matter while simultaneously developing language proficiency naturally within specific contexts, rather than treating foreign language learning and other subjects as separate entities. In other words, the core principle of this method is that learners do not merely learn the language, but learn *through* the language.

Designing CLIL lessons requires basing the approach on Coyle's (2006) 4Cs framework...

III. SUITABILITY OF THE CLIL APPROACH FOR THE SPECIFIC CONTEXT OF TEACHING LEGAL ENGLISH

According to Haigh (2018), Legal English is challenging to approach for the following three primary reasons: (1) the purpose of Legal English is not communication but the regulation of behavior; (2) peculiar habits regarding sentence structure and phrasing in legal writing—such as incomplete punctuation and the use of foreign phrases instead of English equivalents (e.g., "inter alia" for "among others," "de facto" for "in fact") or unusual expressions and pronouns (e.g., "the same," "the aforesaid"); (3) the use of difficult or unfamiliar vocabulary and phrases—specifically specialized legal terminology employed by practitioners like lawyers and judges (e.g., "defendant," "prosecution")—which cannot be easily substituted and carry legal meanings distinct from their ordinary usage (e.g., "find" signifying a formal "ruling" or "judgment," and "furnish" meaning "to provide documents or information" rather than "to discover" or "to equip with furniture"). Given these factors, legal English presents a challenging linguistic system for both instructors and learners. Consequently, addressing these specific difficulties, the CLIL teaching method—based on Coyle's (2006) 4Cs framework—is proposed as an effective approach for teaching legal English; it fosters real-world legal reasoning, cultivates critical thinking skills, boosts learning motivation, and simultaneously develops language proficiency.

Globally, research has been conducted on the effectiveness of applying the CLIL model to the teaching of English for law. In 2019, an empirical study by Contero Urgal at the University of Cádiz examined the attitudes of law and commerce students toward learning English via the CLIL method. The findings indicated that when the CLIL model was applied to learning legal English... ...student learning motivation increased significantly, and the majority of students recognized the benefits and practical applicability of the Legal English course. Another study by Chendeb (2020) was conducted with lawyers from the Lebanese Bar Association. The experiment compared the effectiveness of the CLIL method in teaching Legal English. The results confirmed that lawyers taught via CLIL were able to comprehend and utilize complex academic legal texts. Furthermore, the CLIL process accelerated the participants' foreign language proficiency.

In Vietnam, research on the effectiveness of the CLIL model in teaching Legal English remains limited. An empirical study by Nhac (2023) at Hanoi Law University incorporated simulation activities—such as moot courts, role-playing, debates, legal counseling, group discussions, and forums—into a Legal English course. These activities, part of the CLIL model, aimed to enhance law students' Legal English skills. The findings indicated that students recognized the necessity of simulation activities in learning Legal English, and analysis revealed positive outcomes regarding learning motivation, critical thinking, research capabilities, and soft skills. Based on these results, the author recommends the use of simulation activities for effective Legal English instruction.

A comprehensive study by Bui and Vu (2024) highlighted the suitability and practical benefits of the CLIL method in teaching Legal English, specifically: (1) enhancing students' professional capabilities amidst Vietnam's international integration, where English serves as the primary language for legal documentation; and (2) simultaneously developing students' specialized knowledge and language skills through the study of law in English. ...English; (3) Enhance the ability to research and apply international

legal materials; (4) The CLIL method enables students to master legal knowledge and English proficiency, thereby boosting their confidence in multinational work environments and improving their employability to meet employer demands; (5) Develop learners' legal thinking, critical analysis, and analytical skills in two languages; (6) Align with global trends in legal education.

A synthesis of research indicates that the CLIL method is highly effective in developing both professional and language skills for law students. However, the application of the CLIL model in teaching Legal English at higher education institutions in Vietnam remains limited, primarily due to the various difficulties and challenges associated with implementing this teaching model.

IV. DIFFICULTIES AND CHALLENGES IN IMPLEMENTING THE CLIL APPROACH AT LAW SCHOOLS IN VIETNAM

First, the primary challenge concerns the dual competence required of the teaching staff. Effective CLIL implementation demands that lecturers possess dual competence—comprising specialized subject knowledge and high-standard foreign language proficiency—alongside integrated content-and-language pedagogical skills (Macaro, 2018). Lecturers often struggle to articulate ideas, provide instructions, explain terminology, and answer questions in English; they frequently lack confidence in their speaking and pronunciation abilities and lack specialized training in the pedagogy of teaching a specialized subject in a second language (Vu & Burns, 2014). This is particularly challenging in the field of law, where explaining English legal terms in specific contexts proves difficult due to the unique characteristics of English legal terminology.

Second, the lack of teaching materials and curricula suitable for the CLIL approach is a significant issue. Most current Legal English curricula at law schools are designed based on the traditional English for Specific Purposes (ESP) model. Lesson structures tend to be uniform, focusing primarily on reading passages, specialized vocabulary, translation, and legal case analysis to hone students' reading and writing skills; there is a lack of activities that integrate legal content with language skills, or that foster learners' critical thinking, analytical abilities, and the use of English for argumentation. Developing CLIL-based curricula tailored to the specific characteristics of the Vietnamese legal system requires substantial investment in time and funding, as well as collaboration across specialized departments.

Third, innovating assessment and evaluation methods to align with the CLIL approach presents numerous challenges. Assessing learners under the CLIL model requires evaluating both their specialized legal knowledge and their language proficiency, rather than simply asking questions that test the rote recall of legal concepts. CLIL-based course assessment should be conducted through projects and professional presentations delivered in English. This challenge is particularly pronounced given the specific nature of legal education. Developing assessment criteria using the CLIL method demands that lecturers possess both solid legal expertise and high foreign language proficiency—a combination that is difficult to achieve within traditional faculty structures where training in these two fields has historically been separate. Evidently, establishing assessment criteria and training lecturers to effectively utilize these tools remains a challenge for many legal education institutions in Vietnam.

Fifth, students must possess a certain foundation of legal knowledge and English proficiency to participate in Legal English courses taught via the CLIL method. Effective learning under this approach requires students to use a foreign language—rather than their native tongue—to listen to and comprehend specialized terminology, legal texts, real-world legal scenarios, and lecturer explanations in English. Furthermore, they must engage in critical activities such as role-playing, discussions, and moot court sessions. Consequently, students need to be competent in all four English skills—listening, speaking, reading, and writing—to avoid the pressure and cognitive overload associated with simultaneously processing legal content and language requirements during their studies.

V. SOLUTIONS TO ADDRESS CHALLENGES IN CLIL IMPLEMENTATION

Based on the analysis of the aforementioned challenges, and to ensure the CLIL model operates with optimal effectiveness when teaching Legal English at law training institutions, the author proposes the following solutions:

First, enhance the dual-competence teaching capabilities of law faculty members to enable the application of the CLIL method in Legal English instruction. Providing foreign language training aligned with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) helps law lecturers gain confidence in English communication. Government Decree No. 222/2025/NĐ-CP (dated August 8, 2025) regarding teaching and learning in foreign languages stipulates: "Lecturers teaching at the higher education level must possess foreign language proficiency meeting the program's teaching requirements—at a minimum, Level 5 according to the 6-level Foreign Language Competency Framework for Vietnam or equivalent." Thus, CLIL-based instruction requires lecturers to hold a C1 proficiency level or higher under the 6-level framework. Simultaneously, specialized departments should organize training sessions on legal terminology and English-language litigation skills; this boosts lecturers' confidence in expressing ideas, communicating, explaining legal terms, and facilitating legal simulations in English during CLIL classes.

Furthermore, to address current challenges, law training institutions should consider piloting a co-teaching model involving both law lecturers and foreign language instructors. Under this arrangement, a Legal English class would be conducted by two instructors: one specializing in foreign languages and one in law. Two instructors collaborate on co-teaching and direct classroom interaction: the law lecturer holds primary responsibility for the content, ensuring the accuracy and completeness of the subject matter, while the language instructor leads language support, designs activities to develop language skills, and pre-teaches vocabulary. This approach allows them to complement each other's expertise, thereby providing students with superior support from both perspectives.

Secondly, teaching materials should be developed in alignment with the CLIL method and the course's learning outcomes; legal expertise and language skills must be integrated within each lesson rather than treated separately, as is common in traditional approaches. Lessons should incorporate real-world legal scenarios within the Vietnamese context, enabling students to compare Vietnamese legal regulations with their corresponding terms and expressions in Legal English. Furthermore, a specialized Legal English glossary should be compiled—featuring examples of usage in specific situations—to help students grasp the true legal nature of terms and avoid rote or mechanical application. This strategy alleviates time constraints during class while upholding the core CLIL principles of the integrated development of subject knowledge and language skills. Additionally, the organization of thematic workshops and Legal English clubs should be expanded to provide students with forums for honing their legal knowledge and language skills, ultimately boosting their confidence for future professional practice.

Thirdly, assessment and evaluation methods should be innovated by establishing specific criteria and applying a flexible range of assessment formats. Assessment criteria should be designed using a rubric format that clearly delineates weightings for various elements—such as the accurate application of legal regulations, analytical and legal reasoning capabilities, precision in legal terminology and sentence structure, and the ability to express ideas coherently in English—thereby simultaneously evaluating both legal expertise and language proficiency. Regarding assessment methods, a diverse approach should be adopted, incorporating project-based assessments, the resolution of simulated real-world scenarios, research assignments, presentations, and report writing in English. Following these assessments, instructors should provide feedback on results to help students identify their limitations and make appropriate adjustments.

Fourthly, law schools should conduct foreign language proficiency assessments upon entry to design foundational language support courses before students officially enroll in Legal English. Furthermore, students should study core legal subjects prior to Legal English; this ensures they possess the necessary legal fundamentals and a baseline level of English proficiency, allowing the CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) approach to be maximally effective. Additionally, instructors should employ pair and group work, enabling students with stronger language skills to assist those who are less proficient during group exercises or the analysis of practical scenarios.

VI. CONCLUSION

This article has reviewed the suitability of applying the Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) approach to teaching Legal English. This method aligns with the goal of simultaneously developing legal expertise, critical thinking skills, and English communication abilities among law students, thereby meeting national requirements for high-quality human resource development. However, implementing this approach at law training institutions in Vietnam presents several challenges regarding faculty competence, teaching materials, assessment methods, and course duration. Based on this analysis, the author proposes five groups of solutions to overcome the difficulties associated with implementing CLIL in Legal English instruction; priority is given to piloting a co-teaching model, which aligns with the strategic direction of establishing English as a second language in schools, as outlined in the Prime Minister's Decision No. 2371/QĐ-TTg dated October 27, 2025. The proposed benefits of this approach will be further validated and refined through future quantitative research.

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