STUDENTS' MISINTERPRETATION OF POLYSEMOUS VOCABULARY IN LEGAL ENGLISH READING COMPREHENSION

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Abstract: This study investigates final-year university students' self-reported experiences of misinterpreting polysemous vocabulary in legal English reading comprehension. Using a descriptive mixed-methods approach, the study found that that students reported a tendency to select familiar everyday meanings**,** in which they perceived as contributing to legally inaccurate interpretations. Key perceived difficulties included limited legal domain knowledge, the complexity of legal texts, and reliance on AI translation tools and general dictionaries. While students attempt to use re-reading and legal verification as coping mechanisms, these strategies are often inconsistently applied or perceived as insufficient against the dominance of general language habits. The findings ultimately advocate for explicit pedagogical instruction to help students prioritize legal-semantic reasoning over everyday intuition. Notably, the study emphasizes that true comprehension in this field requires a systematic integration of both linguistic proficiency and specialized legal concepts.

Keywords: Legal English; misinterpretation; polysemous vocabulary; reading comprehension

HIỆN TƯỢNG HIỂU SAI TỪ VỰNG ĐA NGHĨA CỦA SINH VIÊN TRONG ĐỌC HIỂU TIẾNG ANH PHÁP LÝ

Tóm tắt: Nghiên cứu này khảo sát trải nghiệm tự báo cáo của sinh viên năm cuối về hiện tượng diễn giải sai từ vựng đa nghĩa trong đọc hiểu tiếng Anh pháp lý. Sử dụng phương pháp nghiên cứu hỗn hợp mang tính mô tả, nghiên cứu cho thấy sinh viên tự báo cáo xu hướng lựa chọn nghĩa quen thuộc trong đời sống hằng ngày, điều này dẫn đến cách hiểu hợp lý về ngôn ngữ nhưng không chính xác về pháp lý. Những khó khăn được sinh viên đề cập gồm thiếu kiến thức về pháp luật chuyên ngành, tính phức tạp của văn bản pháp lý và sự phụ thuộc vào các công cụ dịch thuật AI và từ điển thông thường. Mặc dù sinh viên áp dụng các chiến thuật đọc lại và kiểm chứng về mặt pháp lý để xử lý khó khăn, các chiến lược này thường được áp dụng không nhất quán hoặc chưa hiệu quả trước sự chi phối của thói quen sử dụng ngôn ngữ thông thường. Kết quả cho thấy giảng viên cần hướng dẫn để giúp sinh viên ưu tiên tư duy ngữ nghĩa pháp lý thay vì trực giác thông thường. Nghiên cứu nhấn mạnh rằng hiểu đúng văn bản pháp lý đòi hỏi sự kết hợp có hệ thống giữa năng lực ngôn ngữ và các khái niệm pháp lý chuyên ngành.

Từ khoá: Tiếng Anh pháp lý; hiểu sai; từ vựng đa nghĩa; đọc hiểu

1. Introduction

In the context of globalization and the increasing expansion of international legal relations, legal English has become an essential component of legal education and professional communication. Consequently, students in law schools are required not only to acquire legal terminology and specialized vocabulary but also to develop the ability to comprehend complex legal texts effectively. One of the lexical features of legal language that presents considerable challenges to learners is polysemy. Baghici (2021) asserted that legal terminology is inherently polysemous, as many legal terms possess multiple meanings that differ across legal contexts and fields of law. This distinction is relevant to learners who recognize a word from general English but must interpret it in a legal passage.

Such challenges are particularly evident in legal English reading comprehension because legal texts are typically characterized by dense informational content, syntactic complexity, and a high degree of linguistic precision grounded in legal reasoning and conceptual knowledge. The problems associated with translating and understanding polysemous words in legal English extend beyond lexical selection to the accurate interpretation of meaning within context. Research has shown that the interpretation of a single lexical item may vary according to grammatical, lexical, pragmatic, and situational cues (Babaxanova & Daliyeva, 2025). Degani and Tokowicz (2010) further argued that vocabulary items possessing multiple translation equivalents within the same context are generally more difficult to acquire than words with distinct equivalents for different meanings. Therefore, in many cases, learners may recognize lexical items but select meanings that are inappropriate for the legal context; rather, they interpret them in linguistically plausible yet legally inappropriate ways. This may consequently distort the meaning of clauses, legal provisions, or entire texts.

At a law university in Vietnam, where students are regularly exposed to English legal materials, interpreting polysemous vocabulary may present challenges despite students' prior learning of English and legal concepts. Although previous studies have addressed the obstacles arising from lexical ambiguity and distinctive features of legal English (Nhac, 2021; Nhac, 2022), limited attention has been paid to the misinterpretation of polysemous vocabulary in the context of Vietnamese legal English learners. Addressing this gap, the present study investigates students' self-reported experiences of misinterpretation, their meaning-selection tendencies, the factors contributing to misunderstanding, and the strategies they employ when reading legal English texts. In order to achieve the objectives, the study addresses the following research questions:

1) What meaning-selection tendencies do legal English majors at a law university in Vietnam report when they encounter polysemous vocabulary in legal English texts?

2) What is students' self-reported experience of misinterpretation in legal English reading?

3) What factors do students believe contribute to their misinterpretation of polysemous vocabulary in legal English reading?

4) What strategies do students report using to address difficulties in interpreting polysemous vocabulary in legal English reading?

2. Theoretical background

2.1 Polysemy in legal English

Polysemy is understood as a form of lexical ambiguity in which a single lexical item possesses multiple related meanings (Sultanova, 2025). According to Lyons (1977) and Cruse (1986), the meanings of a polysemous word are not entirely independent; instead, they are semantically connected through processes such as metaphorical extension, metonymy, or semantic narrowing. Likewise, Babaxanova and Daliyeva (2025) reported that the meaning of a lexical item is shaped by a range of grammatical, lexical, pragmatic, and situational factors, which may result in multiple possible interpretations. Previous research has also demonstrated that one-to-many lexical mappings frequently occur between English and languages such as Spanish, Dutch, and German (Aldhafeeri, 2022; Eddington & Tokowicz, 2015; Prior et al., 2007; Tokowicz et al., 2002). In addition, Rodd et al. (2002) suggested that the meanings associated with polysemous words are not always derived from a single conceptual core but may function relatively independently, thereby increasing ambiguity in understanding. Consequently, cross-linguistic differences in semantic categorization often create conceptual mismatches, making the translation of polysemous vocabulary particularly complex and problematic.

In the case of legal terms, polysemy refers to the phenomenon in which a single lexical item carries multiple meanings – a feature clearly reflected in legal dictionaries. Polysemy constitutes a pervasive characteristic of legal terminology, with more than two-thirds of legal terms exhibiting multiple meanings (Baghici, 2021). A common category involves general English words that carry specialized legal meanings in legal contexts, including terms such as *party*, *action*, *consideration*, *execute*, *claim*, *charge*, *sentence*, and *service*. Although these words are widely used in everyday communication, their legal meanings may differ substantially from their ordinary senses. The term *party,* for instance, in legal discourse refers to an individual or entity involved in a legal relationship, such as a contract or lawsuit, rather than a social gathering. In addition, legal English contains numerous semi-technical lexical items, such as *remedy*, *instrument*, *relief*, and *process,* whose meanings are closely associated with legal doctrines, procedures, or institutional practices. While these words maintain semantic links to their general English meanings, they acquire more restricted and specialized interpretations within legal discourse. Such semantic proximity increases the likelihood of misinterpretation, as students may rely on their pre-existing everyday knowledge without recognizing the narrower legal meaning intended in context.

Polysemy is also manifested in legal collocations and fixed expressions, many of which consist of familiar lexical structures that carry specialized legal meanings, such as *burden of proof*, *execute a contract*, and *breach of contract*. In these cases, the legal interpretation of the phrase cannot always be inferred from the literal meanings of its individual components. Failure to interpret such expressions as legal units may, therefore, result in linguistically plausible yet legally inaccurate interpretations in legal contexts.

2.2 Misinterpretation of polysemous vocabulary in legal English reading comprehension

Misinterpretation of polysemous vocabulary in legal English reading comprehension occurs when learners recognize a lexical form yet select an inappropriate meaning within a legal context. Unlike unknown vocabulary, which may interrupt reading or encourage guessing,

misinterpretation can be particularly challenging because learners may process the text fluently while constructing legally inaccurate interpretations. From a reading comprehension perspective, meaning construction requires readers to activate relevant semantic knowledge, interpret contextual cues, and continuously reassess meaning as new textual information emerges (Koda, 2012).

One possible form of misinterpretation is selecting a familiar everyday meaning instead of considering a specialized legal meaning. Psycholinguistic research suggests that readers tend to access the most familiar sense of a polysemous word, particularly under conditions of weak contextual support or high cognitive load (Foraker & Murphy, 2012). In legal English, ordinary meanings are often cognitively dominant because learners encounter them more frequently in general English usage. In addition, misinterpretation may arise from direct translation from the mother tongue, inappropriate dictionary use, overreliance on bilingual translation, or failure to use syntactic and collocational cues embedded in legal discourse. Furthermore, learners may achieve only partial comprehension, understanding the general idea of a sentence while failing to grasp its precise legal implications.

Several contributing factors may account for these difficulties, which include limited vocabulary depth (Nation, 2001), insufficient legal domain knowledge, ineffective legal English reading strategies, excessive dependence on dictionaries and AI translation tools, and the high cognitive demands of legal texts. As legal discourse is characterized by linguistic density and conceptual complexity, learners often rely on familiar meanings or less effortful processing strategies, increasing the likelihood of misinterpretation.

2.3 Research gap

Although previous studies have extensively examined lexical ambiguity, limited research has explored how learners of legal English perceive the factors that contribute to vocabulary misinterpretation in specialized reading. Research in linguistics and cognitive science suggests that word frequency, cognitive load, and context influence how readers interpret polysemous words. In particular, readers tend to access familiar, frequently used meanings more readily than less common, specialized meanings (McCaughren, 2009; Purba & Damanik, 2025). In legal discourse, this difficulty is further complicated by what Hemel (2023) describes as “approximate polysemy” and the “uncanny valley” of legal language (pp. 1073, 1119). These concepts explain how legal terms can resemble everyday words while having specific legal meanings, leading readers to interpret them according to their ordinary usage rather than their legal meaning. Similarly, translation studies highlight that relying on literal word equivalents without considering the wider context can lead to misunderstanding and translation errors (Egamberdieva, 2025). While these studies provide theoretical explanations for lexical ambiguity, most have examined the issue from the perspectives of general linguistics, cognitive processing, or translation rather than investigating how students experience and understand these difficulties in legal reading. In particular, limited empirical research has explored students’ perceptions of how familiar word meanings, limited legal knowledge, text complexity, contextual cues, and reliance on digital tools, including AI translation, may contribute to misinterpretation. To address this gap, the present study investigates legal English students’ self-reported experiences of polysemous vocabulary in legal English reading. Specifically, it examines how students report selecting word meanings, describe their experiences of misinterpretation, perceive the factors contributing to these

difficulties, and report using strategies to check and clarify word meanings. These aspects form four survey domains: meaning-selection tendencies, self-reported misinterpretation, perceived contributing factors, and coping strategies.

3. Method

3.1 Research design

This study adopted a descriptive mixed-methods design to investigate students' misinterpretation of polysemous vocabulary in legal English reading. The design was selected to capture both the students' reported of meaning selection and their perceptions ofcognitive and contextual factors associated with misinterpretation. Rather than measuring actual reading performance through experimental testing, the study focused on students' self-reported experiences, perceived causes of misunderstanding, and coping strategies.

3.2 Research context and participants

The study was conducted at a law university in Vietnam during the first semester of the 2025–2026 academic year. The participants were final-year legal English majors at the Faculty of Legal Foreign Languages, who had completed most of the required legal English courses and accumulated sufficient experience in reading legal texts in English, enabling them to reflect on difficulties related to interpreting polysemous vocabulary.

3.3 Data collection and analysis

3.3.1 Data collection instruments

Questionnaires and semi-structured interviews were the primary data collection instruments in this study. The questionnaire was designed by the researchers, based on the theoretical frameworks on vocabulary depth and lexical knowledge (Nation, 2001; Qian, 2002), dominant-sense selection in polysemous words (Foraker & Murphy, 2012), contextual meaning construction in reading comprehension (Koda, 2012), and the specialized nature of legal language and legal reasoning (Mellinkoff, 2004; Tiersma, 1999). The final version of the questionnaire consisted of 41 five-point Likert-scale items to investigate students' meaning-selection tendencies, self-reported experiences of misinterpretation, contributing factors, and coping strategies when reading polysemous vocabulary in legal texts.

To establish content validity, the initial questionnaire draft was reviewed by the research supervisor and two experienced legal English lecturers. Their feedback helped the authors to revise several items to improve clarity. The revised questionnaire was subsequently piloted with 17 third-year legal English majors who were not participants in the study before being administered on a larger scale. Reliability analysis using Cronbach's alpha with coefficients ranging from .616 to .718 across the questionnaire scales indicated moderate to acceptable internal consistency. Semi-structured interviews developed based on the questionnaire results were then conducted to gain deeper insights into students' experiences of misinterpreting polysemous vocabulary in legal English reading.

3.3.2 Data collection and analysis

Prior to data collection, ethical considerations were addressed by informing participants about the research purpose, their right to participate voluntarily and withdraw from the study and confidentiality. In the quantitative phase, the questionnaire was distributed online via Google Forms to final-year legal English majors at the participating university. Participants were allowed to complete the questionnaire anonymously within two weeks. Of the 110 responses received, four contained invalid response patterns and were excluded, leaving 106 valid responses for analysis.

The qualitative phase subsequently involved semi-structured interviews in Vietnamese with six purposively selected participants to allow them to express their views comfortably and accurately. They included students reporting frequent difficulty with polysemous words and students expressing greater confidence in distinguishing everyday from legal meanings. Each interview lasted about 30–40 minutes and was audio-recorded or documented through detailed notes with the participants' consent. The recordings were then transcribed, anonymized, and translated into English for subsequent analysis and reporting.

For data analysis, quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics in Excel and SPSS 27, including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations. The questionnaire items were clustered according to the primary constructs of the study, namely meaning-selection tendencies, self-reported misinterpretation experiences, factors of misinterpretation, and coping strategies. Each respondent's scale score was calculated as the mean of the corresponding items. The negatively worded item in the misinterpretation scale was reverse-coded before scale scores and reliability coefficients were calculated. This allowed the analysis to extend beyond the examination of individual questionnaire items to provide a more theoretically relevant picture.

Qualitative data were analyzed thematically following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework. Relevant passages were coded, grouped into themes, and reviewed against the interview material and research questions. After the questionnaire and interview data had been analyzed separately, the findings from the two sources were compared under each research question. Interview accounts were used to explain or qualify the corresponding questionnaire patterns.

3.4 Validity, reliability, and trustworthiness

The questionnaire was developed in line with the research objectives, revised following expert review, and piloted before the main survey. Cronbach's alpha, calculated from the 106 valid responses, was .718 for meaning-selection tendencies, .651 for self-reported misinterpretation, .685 for lexical knowledge, .665 for legal knowledge, .626 for contextual processing and text complexity, .714 for reliance on translation, dictionaries, and AI, and .616 for coping strategies. The lower coefficients, particularly .616 and .626, call for caution when interpreting those scales.

Anonymized interview excerpts were used to support the interpretation of themes. Comparing interview themes with questionnaire findings clarified how participants described their reading difficulties. Because the study relied on self-reports rather than a reading test, these findings do not establish the actual frequency of misinterpretation.

4. Findings

The 106 valid responses were drawn from three final-year classes: 4726 (*N* = 30, 28.3%), 4727 (*N* = 35, 33.0%), and 4728 (*N* = 41, 38.7%). Sixty-four respondents (60.4%) reported reading legal English texts *often* or *very often*. Table 1 presents the mean scores and standard deviations for the seven questionnaire domains. Selected item results are examined alongside interview accounts in the sections that follow.

Table 1

Descriptive results by questionnaire domain (N = 106)

Questionnaire domain	Items	*M*	*SD*
Meaning-selection tendencies	1–8	3.71	0.67
Self-reported experiences of misinterpretation	9–14	3.77	0.66
Lexical knowledge and meaning selection	15–18	3.77	0.79
Legal domain knowledge	19–22	3.70	0.79
Contextual processing and text complexity	23–27	3.77	0.69
Translation, dictionary, and AI-related practices	28–35	3.79	0.63
Strategies for handling polysemy	36–41	3.63	0.67

Item 14 was reverse-coded before the score for self-reported misinterpretation was calculated. Items 1–8 address both reliance on everyday meanings and attention to specialized legal meanings. Accordingly, their combined mean is reported descriptively and is not interpreted as a measure of reliance on everyday meanings alone.

4.1 Students' meaning-selection tendencies when reading polysemous vocabulary

Students reported both awareness of specialized legal meanings and a tendency to select familiar everyday meanings. The highest mean within this domain was recorded for awareness of the restricted or specialized meanings that polysemous words may carry in legal contexts (*M* = 3.84, *SD* = 1.088). Similarly, students reported reconsidering word meanings when sentences became difficult to understand (*M* = 3.81, *SD* = 1.079), which suggests a certain degree of metalinguistic awareness during reading. However, students also reported relying on dominant everyday meanings, tending to interpret words automatically according to their common meanings (*M* = 3.70, *SD* = 1.212) and frequently selecting the meaning first learned in general English (*M* = 3.71, *SD* = 1.179). In addition, many participants reported relying more on general language logic than legal reasoning (*M* = 3.70, *SD* = 1.131). Although students indicated that they actively checked whether words carried specialized legal meanings (*M* = 3.71, *SD* = 1.179) and considered fixed legal expressions (*M* = 3.69, *SD* = 1.149), the comparatively lower mean score for analyzing surrounding legal terms (*M* = 3.50, *SD* = 1.173) suggests that contextual analysis was not consistently applied. These findings suggest that students were aware of legal polysemy but still reported relying on familiar non-legal interpretations during reading comprehension.

The interviews provide further detail on these meaning-selection tendencies as Participant 1 explained,

> When I read a word in a legal English text, my first thought is usually the general English meaning of the word. Although I know legal texts can give different meanings to words we use in general English, my initial response is generally general English.

However, Participant 3 offered a different view: “I do read legal English very often, so I sometimes think of the legal meaning first, particularly if this is a topic that I know well.” She also considered the everyday meaning first when the legal context was less apparent. These variations suggest that students' reported meaning-selection tendencies may vary depending on their familiarity with legal texts and legal contexts.

4.2 Students’ self-reported experience of misinterpretation in legal English reading

Regarding students’ self-reported experiences of misinterpreting polysemous vocabulary in legal English reading, the results suggest that misinterpretation was commonly reported among participants, with most items receiving relatively high mean scores.

The highest mean score was reported for the statement that students had selected meanings that appeared linguistically appropriate but were legally inaccurate (M = 3.90, SD = 1.014). Similarly, many students also reported initially feeling confident in interpretations they later recognized as incorrect (M = 3.88, SD = 1.048). They indicated that choosing inappropriate meanings had led them to misunderstand legal texts (M = 3.80, SD = 1.099), including clauses or legal relationships (M = 3.77, SD = 1.054), and had affected their academic performance (M = 3.75, SD = 1.102). The item measuring students’ confidence in distinguishing everyday from legal meanings received the lowest score (M = 2.48, SD = 1.189). Together, these self-reports suggest that familiar words can pose difficulties when they carry specialized legal meanings.

The interview findings provided further insights into these self-reported experiences. Participant 1 recalled,

> I once misunderstood the word “party” in a contract text. At first, I did not immediately think of the meaning of “an individual or organization in a legal relationship”, so I became confused about who the clause was referring to. Because of that, I misunderstood the rights and obligations mentioned in the sentence.

Participant 5 also stated, “I once misunderstood the word consideration in a text about contract law.” The experiences mentioned above illustrate how participants described the consequences of selecting a familiar meaning in particular legal passages. Participant 3 provided a more detailed example:

> I once misunderstood the word ‘consideration’ in a text about contract law. In general English, I usually thought of it as ‘careful thought,’ but in the legal context, it referred to something of value exchanged between the parties. Because I did not immediately recognize that legal meaning, I misunderstood the legal basis of the contract in that passage. (Participant 3)

4.3 Factors students perceived as related to misinterpretation

4.3.1 Lexical knowledge and meaning-selection tendencies

Students reported difficulties associated with vocabulary depth and reliance on familiar everyday meanings. The item on using a meaning first learned in general English rather than reconsidering alternatives received a mean of 3.82 (M = 3.82, SD = 1.085). Similarly, many students reported that they tended to interpret familiar words according to their everyday meanings unless the legal meaning was clearly indicated (M = 3.79, SD = 1.110). These findings

suggest that participants tended to rely on familiar everyday meanings when interpreting legal texts. In addition, participants acknowledged limitations in vocabulary depth. Students reported that they did not fully understand the range of meanings associated with many English words (M = 3.74, SD = 1.115), while many also indicated that they knew general meanings but lacked knowledge of specialized legal senses (M = 3.72, SD = 1.085). These results are consistent with the work of Nation (2001) and Qian (2002), who viewed vocabulary depth as an important aspect of reading. In legal English contexts, students may know the form and a familiar meaning of a word without knowing its legal meaning. The current study is compatible with the findings of Vu and Le (2024), who reported that legal vocabulary, including polysemy and special terms, posed challenges for translation and comprehension.

4.3.2 Legal domain knowledge

Limited legal domain knowledge was perceived as a factor contributing to difficulties in interpreting polysemous vocabulary in legal English reading comprehension. Among the four items, the highest mean score was recorded for the statement that students sometimes failed to fully understand legal relationships expressed in sentences, such as rights and obligations, which consequently affected their interpretation of particular words (M = 3.81, SD = 1.088). This suggests that comprehension difficulties were not restricted to vocabulary alone but were also closely connected to broader legal-semantic understanding. Similarly, many participants reported interpreting legal texts based on common-sense logic rather than legal reasoning when lacking sufficient legal background knowledge (M = 3.78, SD = 1.113). In addition, students acknowledged difficulties in connecting vocabulary meanings with the broader legal context of the text, including areas such as contract law, criminal law, and civil procedure (M = 3.66, SD = 1.103). The relatively lower mean score for lacking knowledge of legal concepts and procedures (M = 3.56, SD = 1.180) nevertheless indicates agreement with this statement among participants.

The interviews provided further insights into these perceptions. Participant 3 commented,

> One of the main reasons is lack of legal background knowledge. We might know the English meaning of a word but from the legal viewpoint, we may not know its legal meaning because we do not know the underlying legal concept.

Participant 2 also stated, “without sufficient legal knowledge, they do not easily recognize that the word may be a legal concept.” These comments suggest that understanding vocabulary in legal English involves not only linguistic knowledge but also an understanding of the underlying legal concepts and reasoning.

4.3.3 Contextual processing and text complexity

Among the investigated factors, long and information-dense legal texts were perceived as the greatest difficulty, receiving the highest mean score (M = 3.91, SD = 1.047). This suggests that students perceived the complexity and density of legal discourse as hindering their careful analysis of meaning. Similarly, complex sentence structures involving multiple clauses, conditions, and exceptions were also considered a major obstacle to accurate interpretation (M = 3.84, SD = 1.015). In addition, students frequently reported overlooking fixed legal collocations and phrases, such as “execute a contract” or “burden of proof”, and instead interpreting words separately (M = 3.75, SD = 1.120). Students also associated time pressure with choosing familiar meanings, as many participants reported that they tended to select familiar or easily accessible

meanings rather than carefully analyzing the legal context under limited reading time (*M* = 3.71, *SD* = 1.104). Finally, students acknowledged difficulties recognizing contextual clues, including surrounding legal terms and discourse signals that indicate specialized meanings (*M* = 3.66, *SD* = 1.170). Such results suggest that both textual complexity and insufficient contextual processing skills were perceived as contributing to students' misinterpretation of polysemous vocabulary in legal English reading comprehension.

4.3.4 Translation, dictionary, and AI dependence

A relatively high level of reliance on external linguistic support tools was reported in the questionnaire, suggesting that students frequently depended on translation-based strategies during meaning interpretation. The highest mean score was recorded for the statement that AI tools sometimes provide meanings that sound fluent but may not accurately reflect the intended legal concept (*M* = 3.96, *SD* = 0.975). This finding suggests that students were generally aware of the limitations of AI-generated interpretations in legal contexts. Similarly, many participants reported that they sometimes accepted AI-generated meanings without verifying them against the legal context (*M* = 3.87, *SD* = 1.079), while the use of AI tools such as ChatGPT and Google Translate was also common (*M* = 3.86, *SD* = 1.073). In addition, students reported substantial reliance on familiar Vietnamese equivalents and dictionary meanings when interpreting legal vocabulary. Familiar Vietnamese translations sometimes led students to select incorrect legal meanings (*M* = 3.78, *SD* = 1.033), and many students tended to choose the first or most familiar meaning listed in dictionary entries (*M* = 3.73, *SD* = 1.109). Word-by-word translation into Vietnamese was also common (*M* = 3.74, *SD* = 1.124). Furthermore, participants acknowledged that dictionary definitions and examples were not always sufficiently specific to legal contexts to support accurate interpretation (*M* = 3.77, *SD* = 1.107). These findings suggest that although translation tools, dictionaries, and AI applications may facilitate rapid comprehension, overreliance on such resources was perceived as a potential contributor to the misinterpretation of polysemous vocabulary in legal English reading.

The interviews showed differences in how participants evaluated suggested meanings. Participant 2 explained,

> If I use a dictionary or AI, I check the first meaning or the one that is most familiar to me. AI may provide me with a very good explanation but, when I check the result from AI, I see that it is too general or not legal enough.

Similarly, Participant 1 expressed, "If it is easy to explain and AI or dictionary provides it as an answer, I may first accept it as an answer without fully checking the legal meaning." By contrast, Participants 3 and 6 indicated that they saw AI as a tool for suggestions and checked whether the meaning "makes sense in the light of the whole chapter, the collocation and function of sentence". These comments suggest that the usefulness of such tools may depend on students' ability to evaluate the suggested meanings critically.

4.4 Strategies used to resolve polysemy

To handle polysemous vocabulary in legal English reading, students reported using several cognitive and contextual strategies to reduce misunderstanding, although participants described using these strategies in different ways.

The highest mean score was recorded for the strategy of verifying whether the selected meaning matched the legal function of the sentence (M = 3.83, SD = 1.055), indicating that many students attempted to evaluate meanings within the broader legal context rather than relying solely on literal interpretation. Students also reported consulting legal dictionaries or reliable legal sources (M = 3.77, SD = 1.124) and comparing multiple meanings before making a final decision (M = 3.70, SD = 1.088), reflecting an awareness of lexical ambiguity in legal discourse. Additionally, re-reading difficult sections to reassess meanings was another commonly reported strategy (M = 3.64, SD = 1.164). However, strategies involving interaction and deeper legal-semantic reflection received relatively lower ratings. Discussing ambiguous vocabulary with teachers or classmates received the lowest mean score (M = 3.32, SD = 1.223), suggesting that students tended to resolve difficulties individually rather than collaboratively. Similarly, consciously shifting from everyday interpretations to legal meanings showed only a moderate level of agreement (M = 3.51, SD = 1.244).

Follow-up interview responses provided further insights into how strategies were used. Specifically, Participant 5 explained:

> I applied multi-strategies when I encountered polysemous words. I read again, checked collocations, compared meanings, and identified legal topics of the text. If I still couldn't correct the meaning, I referred to valid legal references, or discussed possible meanings with teachers or classmates.

By contrast, Participant 1 acknowledged: “I must say, my strategies were still fairly limited. I sometimes reread the sentence and look up the sentence again, but I did not always compare the various possible meanings.”

5. Discussion

5.1 The dominance of everyday meanings in legal English reading

The findings suggest that students frequently relied on familiar everyday meanings when interpreting polysemous vocabulary in legal texts, despite reporting awareness that such words may carry specialized legal meanings. This tendency suggests a possible gap between recognizing alternative meanings and selecting an appropriate meaning in context. Such an empirical pattern strongly aligns with the psycholinguistic framework of frequency and salience in polysemy resolution formulated by Purba and Damanik (2025) and Rodd et al. (2002). Purba and Damanik (2025) suggest that when a word has several related meanings, people tend to understand it first in the sense they encounter most often and find most familiar. Accordingly, common words such as *party*, *consideration*, and *execute* may appear familiar to learners, yet this familiarity does not ensure accurate understanding in legal contexts. Learners may therefore select linguistically plausible but legally inappropriate interpretations. Accordingly, the findings are consistent with Mellinkoff (2004), who reported that legal English employs common words from general English in a more precise legal sense, which can often lead to a deceptive sense of comprehension.

Similarly, the present study is generally in line with Nhac (2021), who noted that students struggled with the distinctive features of legal English and a lack of legal background knowledge. Such alignment supports the view that familiarity with a word does not necessarily ensure that its meaning is appropriate for the legal context. Successful interpretation, therefore, appears to require not only lexical awareness but also the ability to consider alternatives to dominant everyday meanings and evaluate their appropriateness in context, drawing on sufficient legal background knowledge.

5.2 Misinterpretation as a legal-semantic rather than purely linguistic problem

The survey and interview data reveal that students often misinterpret polysemous legal terms despite feeling confident in their understanding. The present study further suggests that students' difficulties in interpreting polysemous words extend beyond vocabulary knowledge and are closely related to their understanding of underlying legal concepts. Participants frequently reported that they understood the general English meanings of words yet struggled to recognize their legal implications with specific legal relationships, which subsequently affected word interpretation.

This finding can be explained through Hemel's (2023) concepts of "approximate polysemy" and the "uncanny valley" of legal language. Words such as party and consideration resemble everyday vocabulary but carry specific legal meanings. Their familiarity may prevent students from recognizing the need for careful interpretation. For example, students may understand *party* as a social gathering or *consideration* as careful thought rather than their respective legal meanings. As Purba and Damanik (2025), Egamberdieva (2025), and Koda (2012) suggest, difficulties in interpreting words within their legal and discourse contexts can lead to misunderstandings, even when the text appears easy to read. This highlights the gap between students' perceived understanding and their actual comprehension of legal concepts. The reported difficulties with complex sentences are also broadly compatible with the lexical and structural challenges identified by Ba et al. (2025). Similarly, Koda (2012) affirmed that readers construct meaning by continuously integrating lexical, syntactic, and contextual information. Consequently, improving legal English reading comprehension is likely to require instructional attention to vocabulary knowledge, contextual analysis, legal collocations, and sentence-level processing skills.

5.3 Perceived contributing factors and strategies for interpreting legal vocabulary

One noteworthy issue concerns factors and coping strategies that students employ to resolve polysemous terms in legal English reading comprehension. The findings suggest that vocabulary misinterpretation results from interacting factors, including cognitive load, limited legal knowledge. Undeniably, long, information-dense passages, complex sentence structures along with limited legal knowledge increase cognitive demands, making it harder for students to identify contextual clues and interpret legal terms accurately (Purba & Damanik, 2025). In such cases, reliance on dictionaries, translation tools, and AI applications may reinforce misinterpretations. While participants acknowledged that AI-generated interpretations may not accurately reflect legal concepts, many still reported accepting such interpretations without further verification. By providing rapid translations of polysemous vocabulary, these resources may facilitate comprehension of complex texts yet also lead students to accept legally inaccurate

meanings. This finding is consistent with Egamberdieva's (2025) argument that students should move beyond word-for-word dictionary lookup and learn to interpret words based on their meaning in the wider context. When students encounter ambiguous legal terms under time pressure, they may reread sentences to check whether they sound correct without reconsidering the legal meaning of the text. As Ba et al. (2025) and Koda (2012) explain, understanding specialized vocabulary requires students to analyze sentence structure, word combinations, and legal concepts together. Without explicit guidance on how to distinguish familiar everyday meanings from specialized legal meanings, students' attempts to solve vocabulary problems may remain reactive and ineffective.

Generally, the findings address the research gap by examining how final-year legal English majors report selecting and checking the meanings of familiar polysemous words. Notably, the study explains how students may feel confident about their understanding of familiar words while missing their specific legal meanings. Building on previous research into Vietnamese students' difficulties with legal reading (Nhac, 2021, 2022), it also examines the cognitive processes, reliance on AI tools, and ineffective reading strategies associated with polysemous legal vocabulary. In addition, the findings highlight both the benefits and risks of generative AI in legal English learning, suggesting that students need to develop the ability to evaluate AI-generated translations critically and verify word meanings against the legal context rather than rely on translations without further analysis.

6. Conclusion and implications

Overall, the findings indicate that students perceived the misinterpretation of polysemous vocabulary as a recurring challenge in legal English reading comprehension. Theoretically, the study contributes to research on lexical ambiguity in specialized discourse by highlighting students' reported difficulties in interpreting familiar everyday words that carry specialized legal meanings. The findings further contribute to discussions on vocabulary depth, dominant-sense selection, contextual processing, and legal-semantic awareness within English for Specific Purposes.

Pedagogically, the study highlights several implications for legal English teaching and learning. Students need to develop greater sensitivity to legal context and avoid relying solely on familiar everyday meanings, bilingual translations, or AI-generated interpretations without legal verification. More importantly, greater attention should be paid to contextual analysis, legal collocations, sentence structures, and broader legal concepts during reading. For instructors, the findings suggest the importance of explicitly teaching the distinction between general and legal meanings of familiar vocabulary, as well as strengthening students' ability to interpret contextual cues and fixed legal expressions. Such instructional practices may help reduce superficial understanding and enhance overall legal English reading comprehension.

7. Limitations and suggestions for further research

Despite its contributions, the present study has several limitations. Firstly, the participants were limited to final-year legal English students at the participating university. Consequently, the findings are context-specific and may not be generalizable to other groups of English learners or students from different law-related disciplines in Vietnam. Secondly, the study focused specifically on the misinterpretation of polysemous vocabulary in legal English reading

comprehension rather than broader vocabulary issues or other language skills in legal English. As a result, the study did not address all dimensions of legal language learning. Lastly, due to practical constraints, the study did not employ reading comprehension tasks to examine students' actual performance. Instead, the findings were primarily derived from students' self-reported perceptions, experiences, and retrospective reflections on misinterpretation. While this approach was appropriate for the descriptive and exploratory nature of the study, the findings reflect learners' subjective experiences rather than directly measured reading performance.

Based on these limitations, several directions for future research are suggested. Future studies could involve larger and more diverse samples and use reading-comprehension assessments to compare self-reported experiences with actual interpretation performance. Research could also examine other language skills and additional aspects of legal English vocabulary. Further attention could be given to how learners evaluate the accuracy of meanings provided by dictionaries, electronic resources, and AI tools. Finally, future studies may explore pedagogical interventions designed to improve students' interpretation of polysemous vocabulary in legal English and evaluate the effectiveness of such instructional approaches.

8. Declaration of AI Use

ChatGPT and Grammarly were used to support language editing, including improving clarity, coherence, grammar, and readability during the preparation of the manuscript. These tools did not contribute to the study design, data collection, analysis, interpretation, or conclusions. All AI-assisted outputs were reviewed and approved by the authors, who remain fully responsible for the final manuscript.

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Appendix: Results of survey questionnaires

Item	*N*	*M*	*SD*
Students' meaning-selection tendencies when reading polysemous vocabulary			
1. I automatically interpret them based on their everyday meaning.	106	3.70	1.212
2. I tend to select the meaning that I learned first in general English.	106	3.71	1.179
3. I reconsider the meaning only if the sentence becomes difficult to understand.	106	3.81	1.079
4. I actively check whether the word may carry a specialized legal meaning.	106	3.71	1.179
5. I analyze the surrounding legal terms before deciding the meaning.	106	3.50	1.173
6. I consider whether the word forms part of a fixed legal expression.	106	3.69	1.149
7. I interpret the word mainly based on general language logic rather than legal logic.	106	3.70	1.131
8. I am aware that polysemous words in legal contexts may restrict or narrow their meanings.	106	3.84	1.088
Students' self-reported experience of misinterpretation in legal English reading			
9. I have misunderstood a legal text because I selected the wrong meaning of a polysemous word.	106	3.80	1.099
10. I sometimes feel confident about my interpretation but later realize it was incorrect.	106	3.88	1.048
11. Misinterpreting one word has led me to misunderstand a clause or legal relationship.	106	3.77	1.054
12. I have chosen a meaning that seemed linguistically correct but was legally inaccurate.	106	3.90	1.014
13. Misinterpretation of vocabulary has negatively affected my academic performance in Legal English.	106	3.75	1.102
14. I feel confident in distinguishing between everyday and legal meanings of familiar words.	106	2.48	1.189
Factors contributing to the misinterpretation of polysemous vocabulary			
Lexical knowledge and meaning-selection tendencies			
15. I do not fully understand the range of meanings that many English words can have.	106	3.74	1.115
16. I know a word's general meaning but do not know its specialized legal sense(s).	106	3.72	1.085
17. When reading legal English, I tend to interpret familiar words based on their everyday meaning unless the legal meaning is very obvious.	106	3.79	1.110
18. I sometimes rely on the meaning I learned first in general English rather than reconsidering other possible meanings.	106	3.82	1.085
Legal domain knowledge			
19. I lack sufficient knowledge of legal concepts and procedures to interpret specialized meanings correctly.	106	3.56	1.180
20. Without legal background knowledge, I sometimes interpret legal texts using common-sense logic rather than legal logic.	106	3.78	1.113
21. I find it difficult to connect vocabulary meaning with the broader legal context of the text (e.g., contract law, criminal law, civil procedure).	106	3.66	1.103
22. I sometimes do not fully understand the legal relationships expressed in a sentence (e.g., rights, obligations, ...), which affects my interpretation of certain words.	106	3.81	1.088
Contextual processing and text complexity			
23. I sometimes fail to recognize contextual clues (e.g., surrounding legal terms, definitions, discourse signals) that indicate a legal meaning.	106	3.66	1.170
24. I often overlook fixed legal collocations/phrases (e.g., execute a contract, burden of proof) and interpret words separately.	106	3.75	1.120
25. Complex sentence structures (multiple clauses, conditions, exceptions) make it harder for me to identify the correct sense of a word.	106	3.84	1.015
26. Long and information-dense legal texts make careful meaning analysis difficult.	106	3.91	1.047

27. Under time pressure, I tend to choose the easiest or most familiar meaning instead of carefully analyzing the legal context.	106	3.71	1.104
Translation, dictionary, and AI dependence			
28. I tend to translate word-by-word into Vietnamese when reading legal English texts.	106	3.74	1.124
29. Familiar Vietnamese equivalents sometimes lead me to choose an incorrect legal meaning in English.	106	3.78	1.033
30. I rely heavily on bilingual or general dictionaries when reading legal texts.	106	3.60	1.168
31. I usually choose the first or most familiar meaning listed in a dictionary entry.	106	3.73	1.109
32. Dictionary definitions and examples are sometimes not legal-specific enough for me to determine the correct sense.	106	3.77	1.107
33. I use AI tools (e.g., ChatGPT, Google Translate) to interpret legal vocabulary.	106	3.86	1.073
34. I sometimes accept AI-generated meanings without verifying them in the legal context.	106	3.87	1.079
35. AI tools sometimes provide meanings that sound fluent but may not reflect the correct legal concept.	106	3.96	0.975
Strategies used to resolve polysemy			
36. I verify whether the selected meaning fits the legal function of the sentence.	106	3.83	1.055
37. I compare multiple meanings before making a final decision.	106	3.70	1.088
38. I re-read difficult parts to reassess word meanings.	106	3.64	1.164
39. I consult legal dictionaries or reliable legal sources.	106	3.77	1.124
40. I discuss ambiguous vocabulary with teachers or classmates.	106	3.32	1.223
41. I consciously shift from everyday interpretation to legal interpretation when needed.	106	3.51	1.244