

Review research paper

**FACILITATING LEGAL ENGLISH TEACHING AND LEARNING  
THROUGH SIOP MODEL (SHELTERED INSTRUCTION  
OBSERVATION PROTOCOL)**

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**Abstract.** *Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP) is an instructional model for lesson planning and delivery for making content in English more comprehensible for non-native English speakers. If applied to teaching Legal English (LE), it might be useful for both teachers and students. The aim of this paper is to propose a model for teaching LE at university level, based on the SIOP principles. The specificity of legal terminology, the differences among legal systems in the countries, students' lack of knowledge from the legal field and English teachers' lack of professional knowledge have been pointed out in the literature as some of the main challenges in teaching LE. However, it seems that no systematic approach has been identified to overcome these challenges. With this study we intended to contribute to that gap. It utilized both quantitative and qualitative research methodology. Conclusions were made based on the findings from two instruments: a questionnaire with forty (40) students of LE at the South East European University (SEEU) in North Macedonia and their reflections. For the reflection activity, students were first delivered a LE lesson based on the SIOP principles and then they were asked to reflect on the experience and compare it to the regular language lessons. Findings revealed that students consider the SIOP lesson more comprehensible than the regular lesson with regard to the most challenging areas of the LE courses, identified from the literature review.*

**Key words:** Legal English, ESP, instructional model, comprehension

1. INTRODUCTION

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) has had a long history as a separate discipline from General English (GE), traced back in the 1960s. Its appearance coincided with the expansion of international business after the Second World War and therefore Business English was the branch of teaching English as a foreign language that received the biggest attention from teachers and publishing companies (Dudley-Evans, & St. John, 1988). The state of the art of teaching ESP has developed a lot since then. The key components of ESP courses defined by these authors, being the needs analysis, discourse and genre analysis, material selection and course design, have remained in the focus of attention, although many other disciplines have appeared in the meantime. The groundwork on the main ESP elements has been enriched by

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scientific insight into some innovative practices in diverse branches such as musicology, dentistry, technical sciences, etc. (Whyte and Sarre, 2017). In parallel with the expansion of the different fields in which English was used with all its specificities, there was a continuous developmental process of determining the scope of ESP, its definition, methodology and objectives. According to Hutchinson and Waters (1987), the emergence of ESP resulted mainly from the international technological boom and business activities that required knowledge of English for practical and professional purposes; the shift to learning the language for communication and the focus on the learners and their needs. These authors have set the three main pillars on which any ESP course should be grounded: practical and professional orientation, communication and needs analysis with the last one pointed out in many contemporary studies for its crucial role in syllabus design and material selection (Dinamika & Hanafiah 2019, Bytyqi 2021, Erdogan & Mehmet, 2021).

South East European University (SEEU) in North Macedonia has a well developed English language program and all ESP courses that are offered through its Language Center follow the best practices in teaching language for specific purposes. Curricula have been created and constantly updated based on needs analysis conducted with all stakeholders. The main focus is put on professional communication and soft skills development. The syllabi for the Legal English (LE) courses provide opportunities for practicing all four language skills and include many legal topics and many authentic learning resources. However, there has never been an attempt to check to what extent these courses prepare students for law careers in English speaking communities or international law firms or for use of professional legal literature in English for academic progress. Indeed, these matters are part of the issue about achievement and proficiency and they apply to all language courses. Yet, we contend that with LE, students struggle more with the content they study than with other professional courses and that Sheltered Observation Teaching Protocol (SIOP) is a way to overcome these difficulties. SIOP is an instructional model for lesson planning and delivery for making content in English more comprehensible for non-native English speakers (Eschevarria, Vogt, Short, 2007). In the next section, we closely elaborate on why choosing such a model for teaching LE is effective and can provide the needed pedagogical support to teachers in terms of their "Pedagogic solitude" (Norton, 2018, in Meriesto and Arias, 2020, p. 252) referring to the undefined teaching methodology when ESP is in question.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The specificity of legal terminology, the differences among legal systems in the countries, students' lack of knowledge from the legal field and English teachers' lack of professional knowledge have been pointed out in the literature as some of the main challenges in teaching LE (Codruta, 2012, Thanh Nhac, 2021). Teaching LE has been regarded as different and as more difficult than other ESP areas, such as Business English or Medical English. One reason for this view is the fact that legal professionals use a very specialized language even in their mother tongue. In this regard, Strong (2003, p. 1) claims that "UK students of law come unprepared to study law because it is qualitatively different from the study of other subjects". Gibbons (2003) argues that there is a very strong relationship between content and language in law and that it poses another difficulty for ESP teaching. In common law systems for instance, legal professionals must consider many cases in order to understand how and on what bases the judges bring their decisions. This poses a great

difficulty for teachers, as identified by Swales, (1990 in Northcott, 2009). He talks about the wrong approach to reading comprehension tasks with his students because they have been designed to help students understand the gist of the text. He has realized this after he had attended a class with a Criminal Law professor where he had discovered that in legal context, students need reading strategies to find out the main facts on which the decision should be made and not to understand the story, as it is commonly done during LE classes. For non native speakers of English, the reading comprehension of professional legal texts is even more deteriorated as it requires target language knowledge but also specific domain knowledge (Chmelikova, 2021).

The differences between the common law and civil law legal systems are another challenge for LE teachers and students, especially because the available literature is from the English speaking countries that practice common law. The major differences between the two legal systems, as described by Oumer (2018), consist of the sources of laws, the structure of the courts and the roles of the judges and lawyers. They are of crucial relevance for the law students that study the civil legal system in their professional courses while at the same time they read and discuss texts from common law in the LE courses and are supposed to improve their English proficiency. In such circumstances, the application of the SIOP Model can provide a framework for teachers to use practices that will help LE students to learn both content and English.

### **2.1. How does SIOP work?**

The SIOP model was created in the United States after a long research period (1996-2003) by a group of educational experts “to present curricular content concepts to second language learners through strategies and techniques that make new information comprehensible to the students”. (Kareva, Eschevaria, 2013, p. 240). In parallel with content presentations, the model enables teachers to develop students’ academic language skills in all four domains: reading, writing, listening and speaking. Research has shown that in content classes taught according to the principles of the SIOP model, students achieved higher scores on language proficiency tests, indicating that it had a positive impact on language proficiency development (Short, Fidelman and Louguit, 2012). In language classes, the model was tested in Macedonia in 2013 at the SEEU with students of English for Public Administration. The experiment confirmed that students had not only achieved higher scores on every grading criterion including the final exam, but they had also expressed high satisfaction from the course taught in this way.

Based on this positive experience and since content comprehension and language proficiency development have been identified as some of the greater challenges of teaching LE, it seemed worth examining whether organizing the LE course delivery according to the SIOP principles would contribute to improvements in these areas. Thus, the main aim of this paper is to demonstrate how the SIOP model can be made suitable for teaching LE at university level and to test whether that approach will be beneficial for students’ progress and overcoming the greatest difficulties they are faced with while studying LE. The inclusion of both content and language objectives for every lesson is one of the most important aspects of the SIOP model.

...SIOP teachers make the content comprehensible through techniques such as the use of visual aids, modeling, demonstrations, graphic organizers, vocabulary previews, adapted texts, cooperative learning, peer tutoring and native language support. Besides increasing students’

declarative knowledge, SIOP teachers highlight and model procedural knowledge (e.g., how to accomplish an academic task) along with study skills and learning strategies (e.g., note-taking and self-monitoring comprehension when reading). (Echevarria, Vogt and Short, 2008, p.17)

Careful lesson preparation is required for applying the model. It should contain content and language objectives, key vocabulary and lesson sequence, based on SIOP features: motivation through building background, presentation, practice/application and review/assessment. Creating a lesson plan using one of the templates offered by the authors of the model (Echevarria, Vogt and Short, 2008, p. 232) was one of the steps followed in the methodological design.

### 3. METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

The study employed both quantitative and qualitative research methodology. A questionnaire with students (Appendix 1), an experimental lesson and students' reflections were the instruments used. Participants of the study were forty (40) students from the Law Faculty at SEEU that attended the LE course. It is an obligatory course that Law students take in their second year of studies after having taken two (2) other General English courses based on their entry level, determined by the institutional diagnostic test. Thus, the English level of students attending this course was pretty much balanced and chances of having very mixed abilities were minimized.

The questionnaire was the first instrument used. It consisted of five (5) multiple choice questions aimed at identifying the most challenging aspects for students related to their LE course. Then, an experimental lesson, created according to the SIOP principles, was delivered to students. The topic was chosen from the existing syllabus for this course. The last step was a reflective activity in which students were required to share their impressions after the SIOP lesson with regard to the main issues as detected from the questionnaire. The reflection was also intended to provide students' perceptions about the new (SIOP) approach to teaching a LE lesson compared to the regular English lessons that they were having throughout the course.

### 4. FINDINGS

#### 4.1. Questionnaire's results

The questionnaire was conducted with 40 students attending LE. The first question was "What is the most challenging (difficult) for you related to the course Legal English?" As illustrated in Figure 1 below, 36 students, or 90% found the professional legal context the most difficult. Only 2 students chose the option about learning new words as the most challenging one, and 2 other chose speaking more fluently. The conclusion is that majority of students really struggle with the comprehension of professionally related texts in English.

**Q 1: What is the most challenging for you related to the course Legal English?**

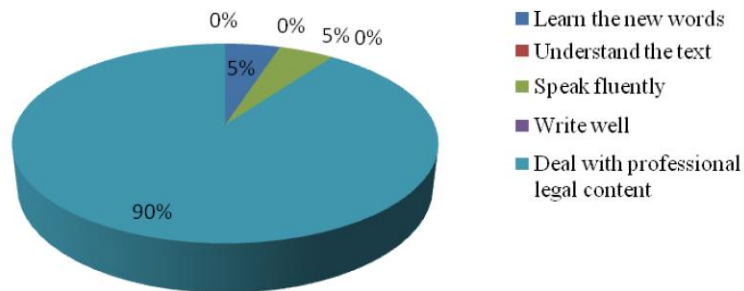


Fig. 1 The most challenging area in LE course

The answers to the second question, “What would you change in your Legal English course?” resulted in majority of students (75%) selecting the option *nothing*, as illustrated in Figure 2. The questionnaire was distributed to students before the SIOP lesson and the conclusion is that students were quite happy with their LE class with regard to all its components.

**Q2: What would you change in your Legal English course?**

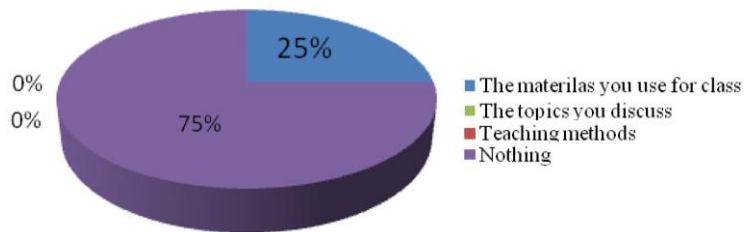


Fig. 2 Areas to change in the existing LE course

Students seemed aware that an English teacher was more appropriate for teaching the LE course than a legal professional, as illustrated in Figure 3.

**Q3: Who would be a more appropriate teacher of your Legal English course?**



Fig. 3 Students’ preferences regarding teaching LE

The fourth question, aimed to gain information about the types of reading materials used for the course, showed that students preferred the Course Reader compiled by their English teacher (Figure 4). These results are in favor of the assumption that students have difficulties with ready-made textbooks from international publishers because of the issues mentioned previously (differences of legal systems, texts that are difficult to comprehend, etc.). Institutionally created Course Readers on the other hand, contain adapted materials from the Internet or materials created by the teacher. However, this poses a later inconvenience to students when they encounter professional texts that are not adapted for their use.

**Q4: What would be better to use for this course?**

- An international book from an English speaking country
- A book written especially for this course by a local professor
- A combination of two
- Course Reader
- No book, only materials from the internet

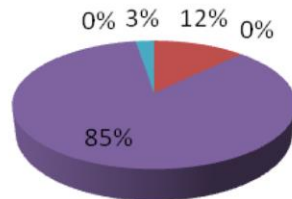


Fig. 4 Preferred types of materials for LE

The last question 5 was about the things students would like to have different in their LE course: “What would you like to change in the course of Legal English?” Twenty six students or 65% would not change anything, and for other options there were 4 students, or 10% on favor of each, and 2 students, or 5% would like to have more translations from English into the local languages, whether into Albanian or Macedonian.

**Q5: What would you like to change in the course of Legal English?**

- To have more texts from the legal field
- To have more opportunities for practicing the spoken language
- To have more translations into the languages of the country (ALB, MK)
- To have more explanations of the legal system in English
- I wouldn't change anything

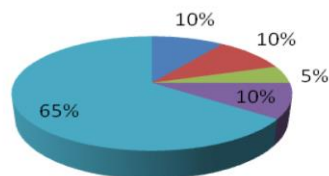


Fig. 5 Things students would like to have different in their LE Course

Data gathered from the questionnaire coincided with the areas from the literature review identified as the most challenging in LE. Participants considered coping with professional literature from the legal field as problematic and therefore they were not in favor of using an international textbook for the course. However, they did not express dissatisfaction with the course delivery and anything related to the teaching. This was an indicator that additional support to the teacher might be helpful to overcome the selected difficulties regarding text comprehension.

#### 4.2. Students' experience with the SIOP model

As a part of the experiment, a lesson was planned and delivered based on the SIOP principles. The lesson topic was International Law and it was planned for an academic class of 50 minutes. It included content objectives (to become familiar with the core of international law and what it regulates; to be able to define the term 'treaty' from legal point of view; to differentiate between matters governed by EU law and International Law and to become familiar with the differences between international law and national law, and language objectives (to identify the characteristics of the formal legal language and to revise the passive constructions). The key vocabulary was determined as follows: bound, treaty, party, encompass, sue, dispute, customary, usurp, invariably, sovereignty.

The Lesson sequence based on SIOP principles included the following steps:

Step 1: MOTIVATION: (building background) – 10 min.

Setting: During the Olympic Games in Peking, one water polo representation claims that the other players took doping and start a case. Which organ will deal with it?

Or:

Turkish military planes fly over the Greek sky without permission? What can happen?

Step 2: PRESENTATION: (language and content objectives, comprehensible input, strategies, interaction, feedback) – 15 min.

Present the text, "The Scope and Nature of International Law" adapted from the book "International Law" by Vaughan Lowe

Pair work: Question/ answer session- 10 min.

Questions:

1. What does the international law regulate?
2. List some international organizations!
3. Which law regulates the dealings of EU member states and which law regulates their dealings with non-member states?
4. What is a human right treaty?
5. Can an individual sue his/her state at the European Court of Justice?
6. What are the differences between international law and national law?

Step 3: PRACTICE/APPLICATION: (meaningful activities, interaction, strategies, practice/application, feedback) – 10 min.

Group work: Come up with own examples of cases that will be regulated by international law

Step 4: REVIEW/ASSESSMENT: (review objectives and vocabulary, assess learning) – 5 min.

EXTENSION: Homework

Instructions: Search the Internet and report on one case regulated by some international court using formal language

After the lesson, students were required to reflect on the new experience comparing it to their regular lessons. Before coming to class, they were asked to read a text on international law that was included in their course syllabus. In class, the teacher presented slides related to the text, similar to the way professional content would be presented as the lesson contained both content and language objectives. Then, there was a pair work to check comprehension and other activities for vocabulary learning and further practice with focus on key vocabulary items. There was also an extension of the lesson for homework requiring application of both content and language knowledge. At the end of the class students were instructed to reflect on the experience comparing it to the other lessons from the same course.

Thirty two students out of 40 completed the reflective assignment. They all expressed their satisfaction from the way the new module had been presented and the class organized. According to students' opinions, their interest and motivation was higher. They also pointed out that it was clear which words they were expected to learn and remember as the most crucial ones for understanding the text and also for the exam purposes. They enjoyed the pair work in which they checked comprehension and had opportunities to talk and listen to each other freely. They recommended having classes organized in a similar way more frequently as it helped them understand the material better. They also claimed that they were able to differentiate between formal and informal language which was among the language objectives. There was a statement by a student who liked the fact that the teacher had not provided the answers to questions, but only showed the path to students on how to find the right answers.

##### 5. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusions were drawn only on students' perceptions and not on any performance measure like a quiz, test or essay which would provide more tangible results about the effectiveness of the SIOP structured LE lessons. What is more, students' reflections referred only to one lesson. However, they indicated that the SIOP based lesson contributed to solving the biggest issue related to the content in English: it was easier to understand and more convenient to use the new legal terminology; the lesson was perceived as more interesting than 'regular' lessons which led to higher motivation; students were able to recognize the formal language used in the text showing that it was not only possible to achieve both content and language objectives, but the complete experience was more convenient and more interesting. Students realized the benefits of the SIOP lesson themselves and stated that they would like to have more lessons organized in that way. All this was very indicative taking into consideration the fact that they did not have any objection to the way their course was organized and delivered previously. Having the same teacher as the SIOP instructor contributed to standardizing the whole experiment and gathering reliable information. The teacher was the same, only the approach was modified.

Based on these conclusions, some recommendations can be offered to university LE teachers. First and most important is to focus on systematic and detailed lesson planning following the templates provided by the SIOP authors. Materials should be carefully selected to contain content and language objectives. Identifying and revising key vocabulary items of about 10 words or phrases for every unit would facilitate understanding and guide students in the abundance of professionally related materials. As much as possible, employ flipping the



classroom requiring from students to read and come prepared in class for further practicing, analyzing and exchange of ideas with their teachers and colleagues. Make efforts to strengthen the link and cooperation with content teachers and try to match the LE syllabus with the study of professional courses: include only the modules that students are dealing with in their professional courses. For instance, do not include any lessons about Trade Law if students have not covered that course in their professional studies. Take examples for class discussions from current, actual events and settings in order to promote critical thinking and increase relevance.

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#### APPENDIX 1: STUDENT'S QUESTIONNAIRE

Instructions: Please circle the answer that is true for you. For all questions you can choose more than one answer.

1. What is the most challenging (difficult) for you related to the course Legal English?
  - a) To learn the new words
  - b) To understand the texts
  - c) To speak fluently
  - d) To write well
  - e) To deal with professional, legal content
  - f) Other (please state what)
2. What would you change in your Legal English course?
  - a) The materials you use for class
  - b) Teaching methods
  - c) The topics you discuss
  - d) Nothing
3. Who would be a more appropriate teacher of your Legal English course?
  - a) An English teacher
  - b) A professor from the Law Faculty that knows English well
4. What would be better to use for this course:
  - a) An international book from an English speaking country
  - b) A book written especially for this course by a local professor
  - c) A combination of the two
  - d) Course Reader (Materials from Legal English books and Internet selected by the course professor)
  - e) No book, only materials from the Internet
5. What would you like to change in the course Legal English:
  - a) To have more texts from the legal field
  - b) To have more opportunities for practicing the spoken language
  - c) To have more translation into the languages of the country (ALB, MK)
  - d) To have more explanation of the legal system in English
  - e) I wouldn't change anything