



A CRITICAL EVALUATION OF LEGAL ENGLISH COURSE BOOKS IN A BLENDED LEARNING SETTING: A CASE STUDY AT THE OPEN UNIVERSITY OF SRI LANKA

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The increase in global demand for legal professionals with advanced English proficiency has heightened the need for Legal English courses that are rich in content and contextually relevant. In response, this study aims to critically evaluate the English for Legal Studies course books: Part 1 - Intermediate Communication Skills and Part 2 - Advanced Communication Skills, used at the Department of English Language Teaching of the Open University of Sri Lanka (OUSL). Designed for a short-term blended learning course, the materials aim to support learners to enhance legal communication skills for academic and professional purposes. The study explores the alignment of course materials with the University Tests of English Language (UTEL) Benchmarks 2021 to identify the coverage of language skills in terms of the standard benchmarks. Initially, an impressionistic evaluation was done to get a general idea of the course books. This qualitative research employed UTEL (2021) descriptors (Bands 3-7), McGrath's (2002) evaluation checklists, and Kumar's (1996) standards for evaluation of course materials in ODL to critically evaluate the existing course books. A gap analysis was conducted to assess content, skill coverage, legal relevance, and pedagogical design, with specific focus on how the materials help students understand legal terminology, sentence structure, and practical expressions. Findings show that the course books present a logical progression from basic to advanced content and engage students through relevant and practical tasks. However, there is a need to further develop listening and speaking components, integration of skills, contextual grammar, and digital integration. Visual design, reflective tasks, and assessment tools were also identified as areas for improvement. The study recommends redesigning the materials using a blended methodology combining Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), Content-Based Instruction (CBI) and UTEL-aligned rubrics, while incorporating learner feedback and adapting to evolving ODL contexts. These refinements will help position the course as a benchmark model in Sri Lanka and beyond.

Keywords: legal English, UTEL benchmarks, ODL, blended learning, materials evaluation

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INTRODUCTION

The increase in global demand for legal professionals having an advanced English proficiency has heightened the need for Legal English courses that are rich in content and contextually relevant. Accordingly, this study critically evaluated the *English for Legal Studies* course books: **Part 1 - Intermediate Communication Skills** (DELT, 2023 I) and **Part 2 - Advanced Communications Skills** (DELT, 2023 II), used at the Department of English Language Teaching of the Open University of Sri Lanka (OUSL). The course books are designed for a short-term blended learning course (English for Legal Studies programme - Approximately 5 months) to support learners to enhance their language and communication skills required in academic and professional legal contexts. ‘Blended learning,’ as per this programme, can be defined as a combination of print-based self-instructional materials, face-to-face as well as online sessions, and online components that together support Open Distance Learning (ODL). However, during the teaching-learning process, it was noticed that the learners struggled to understand legal texts, looked confused, or asked for more examples. Accordingly, this research addresses the alignment of these materials with the University Test of English Language (UTEL) Benchmarks (University Grants Commission, 2021), McGrath’s (2016) and Kumar’s (1991) material evaluation checklists and standards, and the consistency of course materials with global standards in English for Specific Academic Purposes (ESAP) and Legal English. Further, the study aimed to address course constraints and learner needs in line with identified strengths and weaknesses of the course materials.

The main aim of this study was to critically evaluate the course books’ alignment with UTEL (2021) descriptors for Bands 3-7 across reading, writing, listening, and speaking. The study also incorporated the following objectives:

- i. Analyse the content and pedagogical features of the course books using standard evaluation checklists specified by McGrath (2016) to identify strengths and weaknesses of the materials.



- ii. Examine the course books' adaptability and appropriateness for delivery within a blended learning setting and ODL model using standards specified by Kumar (1991).
- iii. Improve and expand the materials based on the identified gaps and the recommendations/suggestions arrived at.

The following questions guided the research:

What is the range of skills covered in the course materials in terms of UTEL benchmarks (2021)?

What are the strengths and weaknesses of the course books in terms of evaluation checklists?

How effectively are the course materials designed and how well do they adapt to a blended learning context?

What recommendations can be made to enhance the efficacy of those course books?

METHODOLOGY

A gap analysis was conducted, mapping the course books' content to UTEL bands (3-7). The UTEL benchmarks (University Grants Commission, 2021) were primarily used to analyse and identify what range/language level were covered in the course books. Then McGrath's impressionistic method and checklist method were used to analyse the course books for their content, design, skill coverage, legal relevance, and pedagogical integration. Particular focus was placed on how resources help students comprehend legal terminology, sentence construction, and everyday legal expressions. Further, Kumar's standards were used to identify the materials' adaptability and appropriateness for delivery within a blended learning setting and ODL model. To ensure a broader international perspective, the evaluation referenced secondary resources, specifically, standards in the International Legal English Certificate (ILEC) Handbook (Cambridge English, 2013). The instructional design and ODL delivery aspects were also examined using design principles derived from the Commonwealth of Learning (2005) and through recent research particularly concerning learner autonomy and cognitive load management.



RESULTS

Part 1 – Intermediate Communication Skills

Evaluation of Part 1 through McGrath's (2016) Impressionistic Method highlighted its functionality but also its limitations. The textbook was structurally sound and offers learners a foundation in basic skills with exposure to some legal forms and letters. However, the overall presentation was text-heavy, rigid, and lacking in visual or design elements that could support varied learning styles. While the content demonstrated moderate legal integration, it was narrowly focused on local notices and legal contexts, with little acknowledgement of the increasingly globalised or technology-mediated nature of law. Learner engagement was of a satisfactory level, and although independent exploration was encouraged, the material had not fully supported blended or short-duration courses.

From the perspective of McGrath's (2016) Checklist Method, the strengths of Part 1 lay in its logical sequencing with implied learning objectives. It covered foundational content adequately, with a focus on reading and writing tasks. However, significant gaps emerged in speaking, listening, and authentic skills integration. Grammar instruction was presented in isolation, while the lack of assessment rubrics, revision activities, or self-evaluation tools reduced opportunities for feedback and learner autonomy. The design remained overly text-heavy with limited navigation support, underscoring the need for modernization.

Using Kumar's (1991) Open Distance Learning (ODL) standards, Part 1 continued to demonstrate accuracy, clarity, and relevance for intermediate learners. Nevertheless, several weaknesses limited its effectiveness for contemporary open and distance learning. Objectives were implied rather than explicitly stated, the structure was dense, and activities often failed to align clearly with learning outcomes. The layout was linear, with minimal visuals or scaffolding, making it less accessible for independent and diverse learners. Moreover, accessibility standards, such as disability-friendly formats, were absent, and technical support was virtually non-existent. While effective as a traditional print-based resource, Part 1 requires updating to address modern expectations for learner engagement, accessibility, and technological integration.

Part 2 – Advanced Communications Skills

In McGrath's (2016) Impressionistic Method, Part 2 presented an improvement over Part 1, with a stronger legal orientation and a more advanced skill focus. The content incorporated a wider range of legal genres such as petitions, affidavits, and law reports, offering learners a clearer link to professional practice. Engagement was



moderate, supported by more challenging tasks, though the rigid, text-heavy design remained unchanged. The inclusion of Sri Lankan legal materials was contextually relevant, but the absence of globalised, cross-border scenarios and online legal practices limited its authenticity in preparing learners for modern professional realities.

Through McGrath's (2016) Checklist Method, Part 2 demonstrated incremental progress. Skill balance was better, with greater inclusion of academic and legal writing alongside analytical tasks. There was also more emphasis on legal vocabulary and moderately authentic activities. However, gaps persisted: speaking and listening development remained under-addressed, grammar was not fully contextualised, and tasks were not consistently aligned to measurable objectives. The absence of assessment rubrics and revision opportunities further limited the scope for self-directed learning.

Applying Kumar's Open Distance Learning (ODL) standards, Part 2 fared better than Part 1 in terms of comprehensiveness, contextual relevance, and learner motivation. The progression of topics was more logical, and the advanced focus enhanced its value for students aiming to enter legal or academic discourse communities. Yet, accessibility challenges persisted, as the text-heavy, print-based format limited its adaptability for self-paced learning and excludes learners with special needs. The instructions were clearer than in Part 1 but could still be simplified to support weaker learners. The absence of multimedia integration, feedback mechanisms, and interactivity reduced its effectiveness in an ODL setting. Although more advanced and relevant, Part 2 also required updating to align with contemporary ODL frameworks, particularly in digital delivery, global orientation, and learner support systems.

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings collectively showed that while the course books had successfully supported the learners in a blended-learning context, their design did not fully meet evolving standards in English for Specific Academic Purposes (ESAP) or modern ODL practice. Specifically, the progression from basic to advanced skills was a clear strength, yet the limited development of listening, speaking, and higher-order skills (e.g., synthesis, oral argumentation) highlighted a mismatch with current ESAP best practices that emphasised communicative and interactive learning (Tomlinson & Masuhara, 2010).

Another key issue was the lack of scaffolding and reflective activities, which reduced opportunities for independent, learner-centred engagement. While authenticity



improved in Part 2, the absence of real-world tasks such as courtroom simulations, digital legal communication, or cross-border legal contexts constrained learners' readiness for global practice. Similarly, the text-heavy design and absence of multimedia resources hindered adaptation to blended or fully online delivery (Omotayo & Haliso, 2016).

In response to these findings, it is strongly recommended to redevelop the existing course books by integrating additional features to make the content more relevant and aligned with current local and global standards. A blended methodology incorporating Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), Content-Based Instruction (CBI), and contextual grammar integration is advised. These approaches are well-supported in global ESAP literature for promoting authentic, meaningful, and goal-oriented learning experiences (McGrath, 2016; McGrath 2013; Tomlinson & Masuhara, 2010). Enhancements in layout, such as the use of white space, visual cues, and modular organization would improve usability and reduce cognitive load, particularly in extended weekly sessions. Listening and speaking skills should be enriched through authentic multimedia content, including legal podcasts, court recordings, or influencer-led legal education platforms. Additionally, the adoption of UTEL aligned rubrics and student-led assessment practices would strengthen learner autonomy, self-reflection, and measurable progress, and is also recommended to extend the duration of the programme to fully incorporate these recommendations. (Karanunayake & Naidu, 2019; Omotayo & Haliso, 2016).

CONCLUSION

While the current Legal English course books demonstrate a well-structured progression from basic to advanced skills, their effectiveness could be enhanced through greater integration, authenticity, and learner-centeredness, as required by both national benchmarks and international ESP standards. With a comprehensive redesign and incorporation of modern pedagogical tools, the course has the potential to serve as a benchmark model in Sri Lanka and beyond, preparing undergraduates for the linguistic and communicative demands of legal academia and professional practice. Furthermore, the scope of this research can be extended by involving more learners and tutors, gathering their feedback, testing prototypes, and co-creating materials. This would also pave the way for further studies by analysing classroom data and implementing such models in practice.



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