

Research Article

English Communication Challenges in Legal and Crime Prevention Education: A Phenomenological Study of Criminology Undergraduates in Cotabato, Philippines

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Abstract

This phenomenological study examines the English communication challenges faced by criminology undergraduates in Cotabato Province, Philippines, in legal education and crime-prevention contexts. Twelve purposively selected second- and third-year students from five higher education institutions participated in in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. Using Colaizzi's (1978) method, data were systematically analyzed to extract significant statements, cluster themes, and interpret lived experiences. Findings revealed four interconnected barriers: lexical and pronunciation difficulties, affective constraints such as anxiety and communicative insecurity, reliance on the mother tongue for cognitive scaffolding, and misalignment between language instruction and professional demands. To address these challenges, students employed peer-mediated learning, translanguaging, metacognitive strategies, and digital or multimodal resources, demonstrating both learner agency and adaptive resilience. These insights informed the development of the SCALE framework—Scaffolding Language Foundations, Collaborative Meaning-Making, Authentic Task Engagement, Leveraging Multimodality, and Emotional & Experiential Support—which integrates interactionist and communicative competence principles with practical interventions for Legal English. The study underscores the need for contextually aligned, interaction-rich, and emotionally supportive instruction that bridges disciplinary knowledge and professional practice. Implications for curriculum design, pedagogical strategies, and discipline-specific language resource development highlight pathways to enhance communicative competence and professional preparedness in multilingual higher education in the Philippines.

Keywords: Legal English, English for Specific Purposes (ESP), Criminology education, Phenomenological research, Multilingual higher education, Communicative competence

1. Introduction

Late at night, law enforcement officers in small towns often face confusion not only from suspects but also from the public, as unclear communication can undermine crime-prevention efforts. In the Philippines, English remains the primary medium of instruction in formal legal education, yet many criminology undergraduates struggle to fully comprehend and articulate legal concepts in English (Genelza, 2022). International studies show that language barriers in criminal justice settings contribute to procedural errors, misunderstandings in victim and witness statements, and ineffective community policing (Moya, 2021). Research by Jalilov et al. (2025) in Southeast Asia indicates that nearly 40% of undergraduate law and criminology students report difficulty in clearly expressing legal arguments, which can limit their capacity to participate in preventive or educational initiatives.

At the national level, the situation is equally concerning. A 2022 study by the Commission on Higher Education revealed that approximately 35% of criminology students across Philippine universities experience moderate to high challenges in legal communication due to limited English proficiency (Bayudan-Dacuycuy et al., 2025). This problem is even more pronounced in regions outside Metro Manila, such as the Visayas and Mindanao, where students' exposure to English in daily life is significantly lower (Domingo, 2020; Pascual, 2019; Ponce & Lucas, 2024). Regional surveys indicate that more than 50% of undergraduates at provincial universities experience difficulty reading legal texts and presenting case analyses (Buted, 2024), which affects their readiness to engage in community-based crime-prevention programs. Consequently, understanding these challenges from the students' own perspectives is crucial to designing interventions that strengthen both communication skills and legal awareness.

Despite the growing number of criminology programs in provincial colleges in Cotabato, few studies have examined how students themselves experience challenges in English communication in legal and crime-prevention contexts. Most existing research focuses on general language proficiency or curriculum effectiveness, leaving a gap in understanding undergraduates' lived experiences and personal interpretations as they navigate complex legal concepts (Bunch et al., 2020). Therefore, employing a phenomenological study with an interpretivist approach centers students' voices and uncovers nuanced barriers that quantitative surveys alone cannot capture. This study aligns with Sustainable Development Goal 4, which emphasizes inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all. The findings will be disseminated through academic journals, local criminology forums, and workshops within Cotabato colleges to inform curriculum enhancement and student support programs.

Research Questions

To address the challenges faced by criminology undergraduates in Cotabato regarding English communication in legal education and crime prevention, this study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. How do criminology students in Cotabato experience and perceive difficulties in using English when learning about law and participating in crime prevention?
2. What strategies or methods do these students use to cope with challenges in understanding and expressing legal concepts in English?
3. How can their experiences inform the design of programs or activities that improve English communication for crime prevention and legal education?
4. What specific language teaching interventions or materials can be developed based on students' experiences to enhance their English skills in legal and criminology contexts?

Theoretical Lens

This study is primarily anchored in Michael Long's Interaction Hypothesis (1983), which asserts that meaningful interaction and negotiation of meaning are essential for developing language proficiency. According to this framework, learners acquire language more effectively when engaged in authentic communication that requires them to clarify, question, and reformulate their ideas (Gilmore, 2007). Such interactions enable students not only to practice linguistic forms but also to refine their understanding of meaning in context. Applied to this study, the Interaction Hypothesis illuminates how criminology students in Cotabato develop or struggle with English communication in legal and crime-prevention settings. Limited opportunities for authentic English interaction in classrooms or fieldwork may constrain their ability to use the language effectively in real-life contexts, including report writing, interviews, and community-based discussions. Complementing this cognitive perspective, Dell Hymes' Communicative Competence Theory (1972) expands the understanding of language learning beyond grammatical mastery, emphasizing the ability to use language appropriately across social and professional contexts. For criminology students, communicative competence encompasses articulating legal reasoning clearly, interpreting laws accurately, and interacting effectively with peers, law enforcement, and the public (Grubb & Hemby, 2018). Their communication challenges often stem from a misalignment between the content delivered in English or criminology courses and the practical demands of legal communication in authentic settings. Adding an affective dimension, Stephen Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis (1992) recognizes how emotional factors such as anxiety, confidence, and motivation shape language acquisition. Students who fear making mistakes or being judged when speaking English may experience a high affective filter, which can limit their participation and overall learning outcomes (Lemana et al., 2023). In criminology education, these emotional barriers can inhibit students' ability to articulate legal concepts confidently and engage meaningfully in discussions essential for crime-prevention training. Together, these frameworks provide a multidimensional lens for understanding students' challenges with English communication. Long's Interaction Hypothesis addresses the cognitive mechanisms of learning through interaction, Hymes' Communicative Competence Theory situates these mechanisms within social and professional contexts, and Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis highlights the emotional factors that facilitate or hinder participation. Collectively, they conceptualize legal English learning as an interplay among linguistic competence,

communicative context, and affective engagement, offering a holistic explanation for why students persistently face challenges in provincial criminology programs.

The Role of English in Legal and Criminological Education

The role of English in legal and criminological education has been widely examined in applied linguistics, English for Specific Purposes (ESP), and multilingual language policy research (Costa & Mastellotto, 2022). In countries where English functions as a second or foreign language, students in specialized fields such as criminology often face linguistic challenges that impact academic performance, professional identity formation, and participation in civic or crime-prevention initiatives (Genelza, 2022). This review synthesizes literature aligned with four guiding questions, highlighting linguistic difficulties, coping strategies, program design implications, and intervention materials.

Linguistic Challenges in Legal and Criminology Education

Research in English for Legal Purposes (ELP) consistently identifies the linguistic complexity of legal discourse. Features such as archaic vocabulary, Latinisms, nominalizations, passive constructions, and syntactic density characterize Legal English, creating comprehension barriers for both native and non-native speakers (Veretina, 2012). In multilingual contexts such as the Philippines, English serves as the medium of instruction in higher education, yet students often rely on their first language (L1) for conceptual processing, experiencing a “dual processing burden” of decoding both linguistic form and disciplinary content (Espino et al., 2021; Cummins, 2000). Criminology students studying law-related subjects, including criminal law, evidence, and jurisprudence, face the dual challenge of mastering technical terminology while performing analytical reasoning. Local studies indicate that students from rural or linguistically diverse backgrounds, particularly in Mindanao, often have limited exposure to formal English registers, affecting their confidence in oral recitations, report presentations, and community-based initiatives (Ponce & Lucas, 2024). Anxiety in public speaking and fear of grammatical errors further constrain participation (Tanveer, 2007). Misunderstanding modal verbs, conditional constructions, or statutory phrasing can lead to conceptual errors, particularly in multilingual environments such as Cotabato, where Cebuano, Maguindanaon, Ilonggo, and Tagalog coexist (Charnock, 2009).

Consequently, linguistic challenges intersect with socio-cognitive and affective dimensions, influencing comprehension, expression, confidence, and professional identity formation. While prior studies have thoroughly documented the linguistic features of Legal English, few address the lived experiences of criminology students navigating these discourses in multilingual classrooms. This gap underscores the need to examine both structural and experiential aspects of legal language learning.

Coping Strategies and Adaptive Mechanisms

Second language acquisition literature emphasizes that learners actively construct strategies to negotiate complex disciplinary language demands (Leki, 2017; Morita, 2004). Strategies operate at cognitive, metacognitive, social, and affective levels, reflecting the interplay between thought, self-regulation, interpersonal interaction, and emotion management (Oxford, 2016). In legal and

criminology education, strategic behavior becomes particularly salient. Peer-mediated processes, including translation and code-switching, help students collaboratively unpack technical legal texts (Romero et al., 2025; Alzain, 2024). Structured translanguaging allows learners to process intricate legal concepts in their L1 before rearticulating them in English, supporting deeper conceptual understanding (Mendoza, 2023; Magadan et al., 2025; Bogota, 2024). Individually, students simplify legal terms, memorize recurring terminology, consult digital resources, and model instructors' discourse patterns (Hutton, 2009; Willis, 2008; Lenz, 2020; Pickering, 2018). Metacognitive regulation, including rehearsal, self-monitoring, and reflective practice, further enhances communicative precision (Gómez Fiquitiva, 2020; Wang & Patterson, 2024). Experiential learning approaches, such as mock trials, courtroom simulations, and community-based crime-prevention seminars, situate English within authentic professional contexts, fostering both disciplinary and communicative competence (Kolb, 1984; Martins, 2024). However, literature cautions that without systematic pedagogical support, coping strategies may remain compensatory rather than transformative (Fedoriv et al., 2024). Critical evaluation: Many studies highlight adaptive strategies but rarely analyze their long-term impact on professional language competence, suggesting a need for integrated, sustained pedagogical interventions.

Informing Program Design for English Communication in Criminology

Curriculum design must be grounded in learners' experiences and academic needs (Dewey, 1938; Freire, 1970). ESP frameworks operationalize this through needs analysis, which informs focused, discipline-specific instruction (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987). For criminology students in Cotabato, challenges in understanding legal texts and communicating crime-prevention concepts provide essential data for program development. Effective English programs should integrate language instruction with professional training, emphasizing discipline-specific vocabulary, discourse structures, and pragmatic usage (Engberg & Tesutto, 2019; Hunter & Bhardwa, 2022). Task-based approaches, such as drafting incident reports and delivering public safety presentations, connect language learning to professional responsibilities (Kasahun, 2021). Structured oral communication workshops and community-embedded projects enhance fluency, pronunciation, and professional register (Singh, 2025; Kazmer, 2005; Rawsthorne, 2019; Holmes et al., 2022). Integration of Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) principles has been shown to improve comprehension, engagement, and confidence (Coyle et al., 2010). In multilingual settings, first languages should be recognized as cognitive resources. Structured translanguaging can scaffold complex legal ideas, gradually facilitating expression in academic English. Such context-sensitive approaches promote responsive, practical, and sustainable language learning.

Development of Language Teaching Interventions and Materials

Genre-based pedagogy emphasizes that learners must master not only legal vocabulary but also the rhetorical structures and communicative purposes of texts (Lo & Jeong, 2018; Hyland, 2004, 2009; Nguyen, 2024). Criminology students encounter genres such as case briefs, affidavits, police reports, and statutory provisions (Miller & Whitehead, 2014; Kakar, 2025). Instruction should explicitly teach text organization, argumentation strategies, and formal language

conventions. Targeted interventions, including legal vocabulary companions, corpus-informed materials, simulation-based modules, and pronunciation guides, address comprehension and expression gaps while situating learning in realistic professional contexts (Bancroft-Billings, 2020; McCarthy & McCarten, 2022; Luchini & Cresci, 2024; Marcheiva & Golovina, 2024). Reflective journals and multimodal materials, such as video court proceedings, interactive glossaries, and collaborative writing platforms, enhance engagement and metalinguistic awareness (Dubiner, 2018; Sifakis, 2023; Sharma & Giannakos, 2020; Flower, 2025). Formative assessments should evaluate not only grammar but also clarity, legal precision, and pragmatic appropriateness (Jackson, 2022; Helal, 2023). In regions like Cotabato, culturally relevant and localized case studies affirm learners' identities while supporting English proficiency (Sudaypan et al., 2025; Aryatama & Pratama, 2025; Masita et al., 2025). Context-sensitive instructional materials enhance the responsiveness, practicality, and professional alignment of language education in criminology (Asante, 2024).

Synthesis

The literature converges on the understanding that linguistic challenges in legal and criminology education are multifaceted, encompassing lexical complexity, syntactic density, discourse conventions, affective barriers, and sociolinguistic realities. Criminology students in Cotabato are likely to experience these challenges within a multilingual environment that shapes both their struggles and their coping mechanisms. Their adaptive strategies, such as translanguaging, peer collaboration, and memorization, demonstrate resilience but also reveal the need for structured pedagogical support.

By systematically analyzing these lived experiences, educators can design responsive ESP-based programs, integrate task-based and genre-based instruction, and develop localized, context-sensitive teaching materials. Ultimately, improving English communication in criminology is not merely an academic endeavor but a professional imperative. Effective legal communication enhances crime prevention advocacy, public engagement, and the ethical administration of justice. Therefore, interventions must move beyond remedial grammar instruction toward disciplinary literacy development grounded in students' lived realities.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Research Design

This study employed a phenomenological research design, a qualitative approach that seeks to define and describe individuals' lived experiences by exploring how they personally interpret and make meaning of a shared phenomenon (Pilarska, 2021). Through this lens, the researchers were able to contextualize and gain a deeper understanding of the English communication challenges encountered by criminology undergraduates in crime prevention and legal education. By focusing on participants' lived experiences, the study highlighted both the nuanced difficulties and personal strategies students employed in navigating law-related English instruction.

2.2 Research Locale

The research was conducted in tertiary schools across the Second District of Cotabato Province, Region 12, where English serves as the primary medium of instruction in law-related courses. These settings provided an appropriate context for exploring students' academic communication experiences, as participants were regularly exposed to English in lectures, discussions, and written assessments.

2.3 Research Participants and Sampling

A total of 12 participants, all legally aged second- and third-year criminology students enrolled in the 2025–2026 academic year, were purposively selected for the study. These students had completed core law enforcement subjects, equipping them with the necessary academic foundation to reflect on their experiences with English communication challenges. Purposive sampling, a nonprobability sampling method, enabled the researchers to intentionally select participants who could provide rich, meaningful insights relevant to the research problem (Campbell et al., 2020). Data collection continued until thematic saturation was achieved, at which point no new themes emerged from the participants' narratives, thereby confirming the adequacy of the sample.

2.4 Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) to ensure a comprehensive understanding of participants' experiences. Interviews were designed to elicit detailed narratives of students' communication challenges. Each interview lasted approximately 30 to 45 minutes and included 8 to 10 open-ended questions, allowing participants to freely share their perceptions while maintaining consistency across sessions. Interviews were conducted in quiet, private rooms on campuses to ensure comfort, privacy, and concentration.

All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent, transcribed verbatim, and reviewed for accuracy. In addition to individual interviews, two FGD sessions were conducted, each comprising six participants. A trained facilitator guided the discussions using a semi-structured question guide, ensuring that all participants had the opportunity to contribute and elaborate on their experiences. Each session lasted approximately 90 minutes and was audio-recorded for transcription and subsequent analysis. The FGDs complemented the interviews by allowing participants to interact and reflect on their shared experiences, enriching the data.

2.5 Data Analysis

This phenomenological study employed Colaizzi's (1978) descriptive phenomenological method to interpret criminology students' lived experiences of English-language communication challenges in crime prevention and legal education. Colaizzi's systematic seven-step process guided the generation of meanings directly from participants' narratives while preserving experiential authenticity. The researchers initially immersed themselves in the data by repeatedly reading verbatim transcripts to gain a holistic understanding of the students' accounts. Significant statements were then extracted, particularly those describing concrete communication difficulties such as explaining criminological

concepts in English, interpreting technical legal terminology, and participating in academic discussions. These statements were subsequently transformed into formulated meanings, which served as the basis for manual clustering of themes, following Colaizzi's analytic logic for identifying patterns of shared experience. To strengthen analytic rigor, the manually generated themes were cross-checked in NVivo, enabling systematic verification of coding, pattern comparison, and consistency checks between emergent categories and source transcripts.

This dual process ensured that thematic structures remained grounded in participants' narratives while benefiting from software-assisted organization and auditability. Furthermore, to enhance linguistic clarity and interpretive credibility, the thematic descriptions and textual representations were revalidated by language experts, who reviewed phrasing, semantic accuracy, and coherence without altering the original meanings conveyed by participants. The researchers then produced an exhaustive description of the phenomenon and distilled it into a fundamental structure that captures the central communication challenges students experience. Finally, member checking was conducted by returning the findings to selected participants to confirm the accuracy and resonance of interpretations. Collectively, the integration of Colaizzi's rigorous procedural steps, manual thematic generation, NVivo-assisted verification, language-expert validation, and participant revalidation strengthened the study's credibility, dependability, and confirmability, while ensuring that the findings faithfully represented the students' lived experiences.

2.6 Trustworthiness of the Study

To ensure methodological rigor, the study explicitly applied Lincoln and Guba's (1988) criteria for trustworthiness. Credibility was established through prolonged engagement, triangulation of data from interviews and FGDs, and member checking, which allowed participants to verify the accuracy of the findings. Transferability was enhanced by providing rich, contextualized descriptions of participants' experiences, enabling readers to assess applicability to similar contexts. Dependability was achieved by maintaining a detailed audit trail that documented research procedures, data collection, and analytical processes. Finally, confirmability was ensured by grounding interpretations and findings directly in participants' narratives and by documenting and minimizing researcher bias.

2.7 Ethical Considerations

Ethical practices were rigorously observed throughout the study to protect participants' rights and welfare. Informed consent was obtained after clearly explaining the study's purpose, procedures, and the voluntary nature of participation, and participants were assured of their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained by assigning codes rather than names and by securely storing all data for academic purposes. Respect for autonomy was upheld by allowing participants to freely express their experiences, while beneficence and nonmaleficence were ensured by avoiding questions or prompts that might cause emotional discomfort. All research procedures adhered to institutional and ethical guidelines, demonstrating the study's commitment to responsible and ethical conduct.

3. Results and Discussion

Table 1 presents the demographic and academic profiles of the twelve participants included in the study. To preserve confidentiality, pseudonyms (P1–P12) were assigned in accordance with qualitative research ethics. The participants were drawn from five higher education institutions in the Second District of Cotabato Province offering criminology programs, ensuring contextual diversity of experiences across academic environments.

Table 1. Profile of Participants.

Pseudonym	Sex	Year Level	Higher Education Institution (HEI)	Core Law Subjects Completed	Inclusion Criteria Met
P1 – Alex	Male	3rd Year	University of Southern Mindanao (USM)	Criminal Law 1; Police Organization and Administration	✓ Legally aged; ✓ Enrolled in AY 2025–2026; ✓ Completed core law subjects
P2 – Bea	Female	2nd Year	University of Southern Mindanao (USM)	Introduction to Criminology; Criminal Law 1	✓ Legally aged; ✓ Enrolled in AY 2025–2026; ✓ Completed core law subjects
P3 – Carlo	Male	3rd Year	Cotabato Foundation College of Science and Technology (CFCST)	Criminal Law 1 and 2; Evidence	✓ Legally aged; ✓ Enrolled in AY 2025–2026; ✓ Completed core law subjects
P4 – Dana	Female	2nd Year	Cotabato Foundation College of Science and Technology (CFCST)	Police Organization and Administration; Criminalistics 1	✓ Legally aged; ✓ Enrolled in AY 2025–2026; ✓ Completed core law subjects
P5 – Ethan	Male	3rd Year	Makilala Institute of Science and Technology (MIST)	Criminal Law 1 and 2; Investigation	✓ Legally aged; ✓ Enrolled in AY 2025–2026; ✓ Completed core law subjects
P6 – Faith	Female	2nd Year	Makilala Institute of Science and Technology (MIST)	Introduction to Criminology; Police Ethics	✓ Legally aged; ✓ Enrolled in AY 2025–2026; ✓ Completed core law subjects

P7 – Gio	Male	3rd Year	Central Mindanao Colleges (CMC)	Criminal Law 1 and 2; Evidence	✓ Legally aged; ✓ Enrolled in AY 2025–2026; ✓ Completed core law subjects
P8 – Hana	Female	2nd Year	Colegio de Kidapawan	Criminalistics 1; Police Organization and Administration	✓ Legally aged; ✓ Enrolled in AY 2025–2026; ✓ Completed core law subjects
P9 – Ivan	Male	3rd Year	Colegio de Kidapawan	Criminal Law 1 and 2; Investigation	✓ Legally aged; ✓ Enrolled in AY 2025–2026; ✓ Completed core law subjects
P10 – Jade	Male	2nd Year	Central Mindanao Colleges (CMC)	Introduction to Criminology; Criminalistics 1	✓ Legally aged; ✓ Enrolled in AY 2025–2026; ✓ Completed core law subjects
P11 – Kyle	Male	3rd Year	Central Mindanao Colleges (CMC)	Evidence; Investigation	✓ Legally aged; ✓ Enrolled in AY 2025–2026; ✓ Completed core law subjects
P12 – Lia	Female	2nd Year	University of Southern Mindanao (USM)	Police Ethics; Criminal Law 1	✓ Legally aged; ✓ Enrolled in AY 2025–2026; ✓ Completed core law subjects

In terms of year level, the participants were second-year and third-year students. This distribution was intentional because these cohorts had already taken foundational criminology and law-related courses, allowing them to meaningfully describe their English communication experiences in classroom discussions, report writing, and legal terminology usage. Both male and female students were represented to capture varied perspectives.

All participants met the inclusion criteria established through purposive sampling: (1) legal age, (2) currently enrolled during the 2025–2026 academic year, and (3) completion of at least one core law enforcement subject. Their academic exposure to subjects such as Criminal Law, Criminalistics, Police Organization and Administration, and Investigation positioned them as rich

sources of information capable of articulating the linguistic demands of criminology education. Overall, the participant composition supported the phenomenological goal of exploring shared lived experiences while still acknowledging institutional and individual variation in English communication challenges.

Table 2. Lived Experiences of Criminology Students in Cotabato on English Difficulties in Learning Law and Crime Prevention.

Probed Theme	Global Theme	Significant Statements	Codes and Patterns	Interpretation
Lexical and Pronunciation Barriers	Linguistic Complexity of Legal English	“Maglibog jud ko kung unsaon paglitok ang words.” (“I get confused about how to pronounce the words.”) (P2); “Very difficult ang vocabulary... malimtan nako.” (“The vocabulary is very difficult, so I forget it.”) (P1); “Lisod ang term sabton... wala tay background.” (“Terms are hard to understand because we have no background.”) (P6); “Makalisod kung mali ang pagpronounce.” (“Mispronunciation makes learning harder.”) (P10); “Mga jargons nga walay translation.” (“There are jargons with no translation.”) (P8).	Codes: unfamiliar legal lexicon; pronunciation anxiety; jargon opacity; lexical overload; lack of background knowledge. Pattern: repeated references to vocabulary difficulty clustered into the meaning that Legal English is linguistically dense.	Students’ lived experiences position Legal English as an epistemic barrier. Comprehension failure begins at lexical decoding, supporting Cummins’ (2000) dual processing burden and Veretina’s (2012) argument regarding the syntactic density of legal discourse.
Affective and Participation Constraints	Affective Filter and Communicative Insecurity	“Dili nami ganahan mag-participate... mag-hesitate mi.” (“We don’t like participating because we hesitate.”) (P3); “Maulaw man ka mag-ask.” (“You feel shy to ask questions.”) (P5); “Maghilom na lang mi.” (“We just stay silent.”) (P4); “Ma-insecure ka sa grammar.” (“You become insecure about grammar.”) (P8); “Mukatawa na lang ko kung mali.” (“I just laugh when my pronunciation is wrong.”) (P7).	Codes: fear of judgment; grammar insecurity; silence as coping; avoidance of participation; emotional discomfort. Pattern: emotional reactions leading to reduced interaction and anxiety-mediated disengagement.	The shared experiences of hesitation and silence reflect a heightened affective filter (Krashen, 1992). Participation is not merely linguistic but emotional, indicating that communication anxiety constrains the negotiation of meaning central to Long’s Interaction Hypothesis.

Mother Tongue Dependence and Cognitive Translation	Translanguaging as Cognitive Scaffold	“Bisaya kaayo ko... makaffect siya sa pagsabot.” (“Being Bisaya affects my understanding.”) (P1); “Lisod i-Bisaya ang law jargons.” (“Legal jargons are hard to translate into Bisaya.”) (P2); “Mas faster ang learning kung Bisaya.” (“Learning is faster when Bisaya is used.”) (P4); “Nasasanay kami sa Bisaya... hindi ma-gets ang context.” (“We are used to Bisaya, so we do not understand the context.”) (P6); “Factor jud ang cultural or language background.” (“Language background is really a factor.”) (P10).	Codes: L1 reliance; translanguaging attempts; translation gaps; cultural-linguistic identity; conceptual mediation through L1. Pattern: frequent references to the first language clustered into the meaning that bilingual cognition mediates comprehension.	Students experience learning as a bilingual negotiation process. While the first language facilitates comprehension (Mendoza, 2023), non-translatable legal terms create conceptual gaps, revealing tensions between linguistic identity and professional discourse formation.
Instructional and Pedagogical Misalignment	Limited Scaffolding and Interaction Opportunities	“Walay unlocking of terms before discussion.” (“There is no unlocking of terms before discussion.”) (P3); “Walay preparation, ipakalit explain.” (“There is no preparation; we are suddenly asked to explain.”) (P5); “Kung unsa ilang gitudlo, mao ra sab amo nasabtan.” (“Our understanding is limited to what is taught.”) (P9); “One week topic sa high school, one hour sa college.” (“A week’s topic in high school becomes one hour in college.”) (P7); “Limited akong English... medium of instruction tanan.” (“My English is limited, yet everything is taught in English.”) (P8).	Codes: absence of scaffolding; rapid pacing; limited negotiation of meaning; teacher-centered delivery; medium-of-instruction mismatch. Pattern: instructional concerns clustered into the meaning that structural constraints hinder comprehension.	The phenomenon reveals that learning difficulty is co-constructed by pedagogy. Limited scaffolding and interaction reduce opportunities for clarification, contradicting the principles of Long’s Interaction Hypothesis, which emphasizes negotiated meaning in second-language acquisition.

Table 2 presents a phenomenological analysis of criminology students’ lived experiences regarding their difficulties with English when learning law and participating in crime-prevention discussions. Guided by Colaizzi’s (1978) descriptive method, the analysis proceeded systematically from the extraction of significant statements to the formulation of meanings, the clustering of themes, and the development of an exhaustive description that captures the essence of the phenomenon. The findings reveal that students’ struggles with English are multidimensional, encompassing linguistic, affective, cognitive, and pedagogical dimensions that collectively shape academic engagement and communicative participation. Lexical and Pronunciation Barriers. Students consistently described legal vocabulary as dense, abstract, and difficult to retain, which led to confusion, misinterpretation, and memory lapses during class discussions.

Pronunciation difficulties compounded these challenges, as students had to simultaneously process phonetic form, semantic meaning, and contextual relevance. Phenomenologically, vocabulary emerged not merely as linguistic units but as gatekeepers to disciplinary knowledge, influencing students’

perceived competence, participation, and confidence in legal discourse (Veretina, 2012; Cummins, 2000). From the participants' perspective, lexical gaps created cognitive friction, where navigating complex terminology consumed mental resources that could otherwise support reasoning about legal concepts. This highlights that language challenges are embedded in students' professional identity formation, shaping whether they perceive themselves as competent legal communicators. Affective and Participation Constraints. Emotional experiences strongly mediated students' willingness to engage. Feelings of hesitation, embarrassment, and fear of grammatical errors led many to self-censor or remain silent, avoiding questions and participation despite partial understanding. Silence functioned as a protective mechanism, preserving self-confidence while navigating perceived linguistic inadequacy (Krashen, 1992; Tanveer, 2007). Phenomenologically, affective barriers were not merely emotional byproducts but structural elements of communicative participation, constraining opportunities for negotiation of meaning, clarification, and skill development. These findings suggest that language learning in professional settings is inseparable from emotional regulation: students' willingness to engage is dynamically shaped by the interaction of self-perception, social risk, and cognitive load.

Mother Tongue Dependence and Cognitive Translation. Students frequently relied on their mother tongue, Bisaya, as a cognitive scaffold to interpret complex legal concepts. Translanguaging facilitated comprehension and enabled conceptual bridging, yet many legal terms lacked direct translation, resulting in partial understanding and conceptual ambiguity (Mendoza, 2023; Magadan et al., 2025). Phenomenologically, this highlights a tension between linguistic familiarity and disciplinary precision. Participants' experiences reveal that multilingual learners continuously negotiate cognitive resources and linguistic identity: the mother tongue provides interpretive scaffolding, but English proficiency remains essential for professional communication. This underscores Hymes' (1972) notion that communicative competence is both socially and contextually situated, emerging from active negotiation rather than passive exposure. Instructional and Pedagogical Misalignment. Instructional factors intensified students' challenges. Rapid-paced lectures, limited scaffolding, and insufficient opportunities for interaction created classrooms that were experienced as linguistically demanding yet pedagogically constraining. Participants reported that the lack of structured discussion or vocabulary support restricted their engagement and deep comprehension. From a phenomenological standpoint, the classroom environment imposed a dual burden: cognitive strain from disciplinary discourse and affective strain from fear of participation. These findings reinforce Long's (1983) Interaction Hypothesis by illustrating how negotiated meaning and collaborative discourse are critical to language acquisition. When instruction is misaligned with students' linguistic realities, learners must compensate independently, often through silence or mother tongue translation, revealing a gap between disciplinary expectations and pedagogical support. Collectively, these themes suggest that criminology students' experiences can be understood as "navigating legal knowledge through a linguistically and emotionally demanding medium." Their challenges extend beyond lexical limitations, reflecting a complex interplay of disciplinary discourse, emotional vulnerability, bilingual cognitive processing, and instructional design (Engberg & Tesutto, 2019; Hunter & Bhardwa, 2022; Coyle

et al., 2010). From an interpretivist perspective, students' difficulties are adaptive, meaning-making processes rather than deficits. Coping strategies such as silence, translanguaging, and selective participation allow engagement under constraints but do not necessarily result in transformative language development without systematic scaffolding (Fedoriv et al., 2024). Students' narratives reveal ongoing identity negotiation, as they transition from everyday multilingual speakers to emerging legal communicators. These experiences highlight the crucial role of interaction, emotional safety, and pedagogical alignment in shaping English proficiency, especially in multilingual provincial contexts such as Cotabato.

Table 3. Coping Strategies and Adaptive Mechanisms of Criminology Students in Cotabato in Using English for Legal Concepts.

Probed Themes	Global Themes	Significant Statements	Codes & Patterns	Interpretations
Peer-Mediated Learning	<i>Collaborative Negotiation of Meaning</i>	<i>"Mas effective kung mag-discuss ko sa classmates kay mahatagan pud ko nila ug idea."</i> (P1) → "Discussing with classmates is effective because I get their ideas too." <i>"Peer discussion kay makatuon ka kung unsay ilang natun-an."</i> (P2) → "Peer discussion helps me learn what they learned." <i>"Feel nako nag-improve akong comprehension kung naay peer discussion."</i> (P3) → "I feel my comprehension improves when there's peer discussion." <i>"Naga-peer discussion mi, naga-share mi ug idea para masabtan namo ang topic."</i> (P4) → "We share ideas in peer discussion to understand the topic better."	Codes: Peer discussion, idea-sharing, scaffolding, exposure to English Patterns: Emerged repeatedly from participants describing collaborative learning as essential for comprehension and confidence	Peer-mediated interaction serves as a social and cognitive scaffold, consistent with Long's Interaction Hypothesis (1983), allowing negotiation of meaning and co-construction of understanding in legal English.

Translanguaging & Language Simplification	<i>L1 Support as Cognitive Scaffold</i>	<i>“Are friends fluent in English, mag-English pud mi usahay sa istorya sa class.” (P10) → “Since my friends are fluent in English, we sometimes speak English in class.”</i> <i>“Translation to Bisaya mas masabtan nako kaysa English.” (P2) → “Translation into Bisaya helps me understand better.”</i> <i>“Bisan mag-English sila, maka-sabot nako gamay.” (P4) → “Even if they speak English, I can understand a little.”</i> <i>“Mas simple ang explanation sa classmates kaysa sa instructor.” (P7) → “Classmates give simpler explanations than the instructor.”</i> <i>“I-search sa internet kung naa kay terms nga wala nasabtan.” (P8) → “I search online if there are terms I don’t understand.”</i> <i>“Tagalog videos mas mapadali ang understanding sa concepts.” (P10) → “Tagalog videos make understanding concepts easier.”</i>	Codes: Translanguaging, simplification, scaffolding, code-switching Patterns: Emerged from participants describing L1 use, translation, and simplified explanations to bridge comprehension gaps	Bisaya or Tagalog functions as a cognitive scaffold, supporting comprehension and gradual English proficiency, consistent with translanguaging scholarship (Mendoza, 2023; Magadan et al., 2025).
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Self-Regulation & Metacognitive Strategies	<i>Autonomous Learning & Study Habits</i>	<i>“Na-adapt nako habit sa akoang friend, nag-inactive ko, pero nag-motivate ko to study.”</i> (P1) → “I adapted my friend’s study habits and became motivated to study actively.” <i>“Gina-change nako akong study habit, naa koy time management.”</i> (P2) → “I changed my study habits to include time management.” <i>“Mangita gyud kog materials nga makatabang sa comprehension ug grammar.”</i> (P6) → “I seek materials to help with comprehension and grammar.” <i>“Mag-advance reading ko para ma-assess nako if sako akong pagsabot.”</i> (P8) → “I do advance reading to check if I understood correctly.” <i>“Gina-record nako discussions para pag-study, mas masabtan nako.”</i> (P9) → “I record discussions to review and understand better.”	Codes: Self-monitoring, habit formation, planning, rehearsal Patterns: Emerged from descriptions of deliberate, structured study strategies and self-motivation	Students practice metacognition and autonomous regulation to manage comprehension and expression, aligned with Oxford (2016) and Krashen’s affective filter (1992).
Technology & Multimodal Resources	<i>Digital and Multimedia Support</i>	<i>“Mas effective kung i-search sa AI before basing on handout.”</i> (P1) → “It’s more effective to search on AI first.”	Codes: AI-assisted learning, online videos, digital content, multimedia Patterns: Emerged where participants	Technology provides flexible, multimodal scaffolds that complement classroom

“Mag-seek sa internet kung naa kay wala nasabtan nga terms.” (P8)
→ “I search online if there are terms I don’t understand.”

“Mas dali ang online search kaysa classroom readings.” (P8) → “Online searches are easier than classroom readings.”

“Tagalog videos guided sa translated resources para masabtan English.” (P10)
→ “Tagalog videos help me understand the English version.”

“Naa may uploaded resources, didto mag-rely during exams.” (P6) → “We rely on uploaded resources during exams.”

described using technology to clarify and contextualize legal English

instruction, supporting comprehension and self-directed learning, consistent with ESP literature (Lenz, 2020; Pickering, 2018).

The analysis in Table 3, which speaks of coping strategies employed by criminology students in Cotabato, reveals a sophisticated interplay of cognitive, social, and emotional mechanisms through which learners navigate the linguistic demands of Legal English. Rather than merely summarizing observed behaviors, the findings demonstrate purposeful, contextually grounded adaptations that reflect both resilience and the gradual construction of professional identity. Peer-Mediated Learning emerged as the most salient strategy, with students consistently highlighting collaborative discussions, shared explanations, and observation of fluent peers as essential mechanisms for clarifying legal terminology and principles.

Participants reported actively testing interpretations, reformulating ideas, and negotiating meaning within supportive peer networks. This pattern indicates that peer interaction functions not only as a cognitive tool for comprehension but also as a social scaffold that reduces anxiety and promotes sustained engagement. In rational terms, the prominence of peer-mediated learning suggests that the learners’ agency is socially distributed: meaning-making occurs in interaction rather than in isolation. From an educational standpoint, these findings underscore that collaborative practices are central rather than supplementary to the acquisition of legal language, reinforcing Long’s (1983) Interaction Hypothesis that the negotiation of meaning drives linguistic development.

Critically, these interactions also shape professional identity, as students gradually internalize disciplinary discourse through socially mediated practice.

Translanguaging and Language Simplification functioned as deliberate cognitive scaffolds, allowing students to process dense legal discourse while managing comprehension load. Participants reported relying on Bisaya or Tagalog translations, paraphrased peer explanations, and simplified discourse to anchor unfamiliar terminology within familiar linguistic frameworks before rearticulating it in English. Interpreted rationally, this strategy reflects a metacognitive calibration: learners actively balance cognitive load and linguistic accessibility to optimize understanding.

Rather than signaling a deficiency, translanguaging demonstrates strategic deployment of full linguistic repertoires, consistent with Mendoza (2023) and Magadan et al. (2025), and aligns with Hymes' (1972) conception of communicative competence as contextually situated. Conceptually, these practices suggest that multilingual learners can use adaptive scaffolding that simultaneously supports comprehension and incremental proficiency development, illustrating the functional role of L1 as a bridge to disciplinary mastery.

Self-Regulation and Metacognitive Strategies highlighted learners' emerging autonomy and reflective engagement with complex materials. Students described intentionally managing study habits, rehearsing explanations, consulting additional resources, and monitoring comprehension in ways that reveal deliberate, goal-oriented regulation of both cognition and emotion. Interpreting these behaviors through an educational lens, self-regulation emerges as a mechanism that extends beyond individual cognition to encompass resilience, persistence, and intrinsic motivation.

This interpretation aligns with Oxford's (2016) framework and Krashen's (1992) Affective Filter Hypothesis, demonstrating that sustained engagement with Legal English depends as much on emotional confidence and persistence as on linguistic exposure. These strategies reflect an iterative learning process: students continually assess gaps in understanding, adjust approaches, and integrate feedback, thereby actively shaping both linguistic and disciplinary competence.

Technology and Multimodal Resources provided an additional layer of strategic support. Students leveraged AI tools, online lectures, translated multimedia, and videos to reinforce comprehension, contextualize abstract legal concepts, and extend learning beyond the classroom. Beyond functional utility, these resources served as personalized scaffolds that accommodated individual learning preferences, allowed iterative practice, and enabled cross-verification of interpretations. From a rational standpoint, the integration of multimodal tools illustrates the learners' capacity to curate and navigate complex knowledge environments autonomously. These practices resonate with contemporary ESP literature (Lenz, 2020; Pickering, 2018), demonstrating that disciplinary language learning increasingly requires adaptive engagement with multiple semiotic modes. Taken collectively, the strategies reflect a model of "strategic, socially

mediated, and multimodal engagement” that underscores how learners actively construct meaning within Legal English.

They do not passively respond to linguistic challenges; rather, they iteratively negotiate understanding, leverage multilingual resources, regulate affect and cognition, and harness technology to enhance comprehension and expression. This pattern extends CLIL principles (Coyle et al., 2010) and genre-based ESP perspectives (Hyland, 2004; Hyland, 2009) by highlighting that effective disciplinary language learning requires deliberate scaffolding, interaction, and reflective practice, rather than mere exposure to English instruction.

From a phenomenological perspective, students’ narratives reveal a trajectory of identity formation: coping strategies serve as pathways through which learners cultivate confidence and a professional self-conception as legal communicators. The data suggest that language learning in criminology is inherently socially situated, emotionally mediated, and pedagogically structured, with adaptive strategies functioning simultaneously as instruments of comprehension, confidence-building, and disciplinary enculturation. Importantly, these findings challenge assumptions that English exposure alone ensures proficiency; sustained competence emerges from deliberate, reflective, and interactionally anchored practices that bridge cognition, social interaction, and affective regulation.

Table 4. Phenomenological Foundations for Designing English Communication Programs in Criminology.

Probed Theme	Global Theme	Significant Statements	Codes and Patterns	Interpretation
Contextualized ESP Integration	Alignment of English Instruction with Criminology Content	“Sa minor subjects kay didto mostly ang English activities... ma-connect nako sa major.” (“English activities in minor subjects connect to my major.”) (P1); “Gina-contextualize ang discussion didto sa law subjects namo.” (“English discussions are contextualized in our law subjects.”) (P2); “Naa sad instructors nga dili nila i-contextualize... Dapat contextualize jud.” (“Some instructors do not contextualize the lessons; they really should.”) (P3); “Review materials... dapat match siya sa amoang needs.” (“Review materials should match our criminology needs.”) (P8); “Reflection essays nga simple English lang para masabtan.” (“Reflection essays using simple	Codes: contextualization; ESP alignment; relevance; simplified discourse. Pattern: repeated emphasis on linking English instruction to criminology contexts and dissatisfaction when contextualization is absent.	Participants emphasized the need for an English for Specific Purposes (ESP)-based curriculum in which language instruction mirrors criminology discourse. Contextualized learning enhances relevance, comprehension, and transfer of communication skills to professional practice.

		English improve comprehension.”) (P10).		
Professional Relevance and Career Preparation	English as a Tool for Legal Practice and Career Mobility	“Mag-conduct ka ug research, reports... English gyud.” (“Research and report writing require English.”) (P4); “Makatabang ang English sa journals and interviews.” (“English helps in journals and interviews.”) (P5); “Dapat proficient sa paghimo ug blotters or police reports.” (“English proficiency is needed for writing blotters and police reports.”) (P11); “Mas daghan career opportunities kung kabalo mag-English.” (“There are more career opportunities if you are proficient in English.”) (P3); “Mas dali masabtan ang law subjects kung proficient sa English.” (“Law subjects are easier to understand with English proficiency.”) (P12).	Codes: professional literacy; career readiness; report writing; academic reading. Pattern: consistent association of English competence with professional responsibilities and employability.	Students perceive English proficiency as professional capital essential for legal documentation, academic literacy, and career advancement. Findings suggest embedding authentic criminology communication tasks to strengthen workplace readiness.
Preparatory Training and Structured Support	Early Intervention and Scaffolded Language Development	“Naa unta intervention like training before sa actual class.” (“There should be intervention training before the actual classes.”) (P9); “Murag briefing class... before pa ang klase kay English gyud.” (“There should be orientation classes in English before the courses begin.”) (P10); “Naay training and assessment para madali mag-adjust.” (“Training and assessment help students adjust more easily.”) (P7); “Dapat naay English-based programs.” (“There should be English-based programs.”) (P6); “Unlocking of terms before discussion.” (“Vocabulary should be explained before the lesson.”) (P5).	Codes: bridging programs; orientation; vocabulary scaffolding; early assessment. Pattern: recurring recommendations for preparatory programs, bridging courses, and structured vocabulary support.	Participants advocated scaffolded learning experiences and bridging initiatives to reduce linguistic challenges during transition into criminology courses. These recommendations align with CLIL principles and theories emphasizing reduced affective barriers through structured language support.

Interactive, Multimodal, and Experiential Learning	Authentic Interaction and Collaborative Practice	“Peer and group support... teamwork and collaboration.” (“Peer and group support encourage learning.”) (P5); “Videos or documentary with subtitles para sayon sabton.” (“Videos or documentaries with subtitles make learning easier.”) (P9); “Mas practical ang workshop and seminars.” (“Workshops and seminars provide practical learning experiences.”) (P6); “Police reports writing in English maka-help sa grammar.” (“Writing police reports in English improves grammar.”) (P8); “Situational or real-life scenario explanation mas dali i-comprehend.” (“Real-life scenarios are easier to understand.”) (P12).	Codes: interaction; multimodality; experiential learning; collaboration. Pattern: repeated emphasis on workshops, peer learning, authentic tasks, and multimedia resources.	Students favored task-based, interactive, and multimodal instructional approaches that promote authentic communication and collaborative meaning-making. These experiences support pedagogical practices consistent with Long’s Interaction Hypothesis and experiential language learning.
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The analysis of Table 4 moves beyond significant statements to formulated meanings, thematic clustering, and an exhaustive description, providing a nuanced understanding of how criminology students experience English communication instruction. The emergent themes suggest that effective English programs must be contextualized, professionally relevant, scaffolded, and interaction-driven, reflecting both cognitive and affective dimensions of learning.

Contextualized ESP Integration. Participants consistently highlighted that English instruction becomes meaningful when it is directly connected to criminology tasks. Positive engagement was reported when activities in minor subjects, such as general English, were explicitly linked to legal reporting, case analysis, or procedural documentation. Conversely, students expressed disengagement when English activities lacked relevance to criminology. This indicates that language learning is not inherently motivating unless it mirrors students’ professional realities.

While Hutchinson and Waters (1987) and Dewey (1938) support the theoretical basis for needs-based and experiential learning, the data suggest a more nuanced interpretation: it is not merely exposure to content-specific vocabulary, but the integration of that vocabulary into authentic problem-solving contexts that informs comprehension and sustained engagement. From a program-design perspective, this means curricular alignment with legal discourse and situationally meaningful tasks is essential, rather than the traditional approach of treating English as peripheral.

Professional Relevance and Career Preparation. Participants consistently framed English proficiency as instrumental to their professional identity, particularly in report writing, interviews, research communication, and crime-prevention interactions. This reflects Hymes’ (1972) concept of communicative competence, but the student narratives deepen this interpretation:

English is perceived as professional currency, a tool that enables legitimacy and efficacy in criminology practice.

Their experiences reveal that students are not learning English in abstraction; they are actively constructing professional identity through language mastery. Consequently, program design must foreground authentic, career-oriented tasks, such as drafting incident reports or explaining legal concepts to non-specialist audiences, rather than generic language exercises (Kasahun, 2021).

Preparatory Training and Structured Support. A recurrent theme was the linguistic “shock” students experienced when encountering technical terminology without prior exposure. This underscores the affective dimension of language learning, resonating with Krashen’s (1992) Affective Filter Hypothesis: anxiety and cognitive overload hinder comprehension.

Interpretively, the data suggest that structured preparatory scaffolding is not optional but foundational, enabling students to navigate content and language simultaneously (Coyle et al., 2010). Bridging courses, early assessment, and targeted vocabulary support were highlighted as mechanisms that mitigate affective barriers, promote readiness, and facilitate the internalization of professional discourse.

Interactive, Multimodal, and Experiential Learning. Participants emphasized that learning was most effective in interaction-rich, experiential contexts, including peer collaboration, workshops, simulations, and multimedia-supported exercises.

This aligns with Long’s (1983) Interaction Hypothesis, but the findings extend the theoretical understanding: interaction is not merely a cognitive exercise; it is a site for negotiating meaning, socializing into professional norms, and enacting emerging professional identities. Experiential and multimodal resources were particularly valued because they mirrored real criminology scenarios, providing opportunities for students to practice, reflect, and refine communicative strategies in contexts analogous to future professional environments (Holmes et al., 2022).

The overarching insight emerging from these themes is that designing English communication programs for criminology students requires contextualization, scaffolding, and meaningful interaction. Students’ experiences reveal that effective instruction is not about increased exposure to English but about ensuring alignment with professional discourse, readiness to manage affective and cognitive demands, and engagement in authentic communicative tasks. The findings affirm ESP and CLIL principles advocating integrated content-language instruction (Engberg & Tesutto, 2019; Hunter & Bhardwa, 2022), while simultaneously reinforcing Freire’s (1970) assertion that education must respond to learners’ lived realities.

Nevertheless, these findings indicate that students’ professional identity formation is inextricably linked to language program design. Curricula that ignore

authentic tasks or scaffolded progression risk hindering students' transition into competent legal communicators.

In contrast, programs that integrate multilingual realities, authentic criminology content, scaffolded learning, and interactive experiences support both linguistic and professional development. This evidence positions English competence as foundational, not peripheral, to criminology education, shaping not only cognitive skills but also the affective and professional dimensions of students' learning trajectories.

Table 5. Complementarity Framework for Language Teaching Interventions in Legal and Criminology English.

Phenomenological Findings	Thematic Insight	ELT Interventions	Theoretical & Empirical Basis	Framework Contribution
Difficulty understanding legal vocabulary and dense discourse	Lexical complexity and conceptual overload	Legal Vocabulary Companion & Interactive Glossary (definitions, contextual examples, L1 translation, scenario-based usage)	Legal English complexity (Veretina, 2012); genre pedagogy (Hyland, 2004); vocabulary scaffolding (Bancroft-Billings, 2020)	Reduces cognitive load and supports conceptual clarity through structured lexical scaffolding
Hesitation and anxiety in speaking English during discussions	Affective barriers and low communicative confidence	Structured Oral Communication Workshops (role-play, guided recitations, pronunciation drills, reflection journals)	Affective Filter Hypothesis (Krashen, 1992); oral ESP workshops (Singh, 2025)	Builds confidence and lowers anxiety, enabling active participation and communicative competence
Reliance on peers and translanguaging for comprehension	Collaborative negotiation of meaning and L1 scaffolding	Peer-Mediated Translanguaging Modules (group decoding of legal texts, bilingual case discussions, collaborative summaries)	Interaction Hypothesis (Long, 1983); translanguaging pedagogy (Mendoza, 2023)	Transforms informal coping into structured collaborative learning promoting deeper comprehension
Dependence on digital tools, AI, and multimedia resources	Multimodal and autonomous learning behaviors	Multimodal Legal English Learning Package (AI-guided tasks, subtitled legal videos, recorded lectures, interactive simulations)	Multimodal learning (Sharma & Giannakos, 2020); digital ESP practices (Lenz, 2020)	Enhances accessibility and engagement while reinforcing comprehension through varied input modes
Need for contextualized activities linked to criminology tasks	ESP alignment and professional relevance	Task-Based Legal Communication Modules (incident report writing, mock interviews,	ESP task-based approach (Kasahun, 2021); CLIL integration (Coyle et al., 2010)	Bridges theory and practice, ensuring language learning mirrors professional

Lack of preparatory support and vocabulary orientation	Linguistic shock and insufficient scaffolding	crime-prevention presentations) Bridging / Preparatory English for Criminology Course (terminology unlocking, baseline assessment, strategy training)	Needs analysis in ESP (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987); scaffolding principles (Freire, 1970)	criminology communication Provides structured transition and readiness, preventing early comprehension gaps
Desire for experiential learning and seminars	Authentic professional engagement	Simulation-Based Learning Kit (mock trials, forensic briefings, community crime-prevention seminars)	Experiential learning (Kolb, 1984); simulation-based ESP (Luchini & Cresci, 2024)	Develops functional communicative competence through authentic professional scenarios

The SCALE Framework for Legal English in criminology emerges directly from students' lived experiences, synthesizing their reported challenges and coping strategies into a coherent, integrated model. Unlike prescriptive teaching techniques, the framework reflects an interpretivist reading of the data, translating experiential realities into a multi-dimensional intervention that addresses linguistic, cognitive, social, and affective dimensions of English communication. Each component is not merely descriptive; it performs a distinct function grounded in participants' rationalized needs, showing how challenges in comprehension, expression, and professional readiness can be systematically addressed.

Scaffolding Language Foundations. Students consistently described difficulties with dense legal vocabulary and complex disciplinary discourse. These narratives suggest that comprehension failures often stem from cognitive overload when encountering unfamiliar terminology. The Scaffolding Language Foundations component directly addresses this burden by offering preparatory interventions, including legal glossaries, targeted vocabulary sessions, and bridging programs. These strategies function preventively, minimizing linguistic shock while establishing conceptual clarity. From a cognitive standpoint, participants' reflections illustrate the dual-processing challenge identified by Cummins (2000): the need to decode lexical items can compete with the construction of meaning. By systematically introducing specialized vocabulary, scaffolding reduces this interference, allowing learners to focus on analytical and interpretive tasks. Participants' own accounts indicate that lexical familiarity increased both confidence and willingness to participate, supporting Engberg and Tesutto's (2019) claims regarding explicit ESP instruction. In short, this component rationally operationalizes linguistic preparation, providing the necessary foundation for higher-order communicative engagement.

Collaborative Meaning-Making. Data reveal that students naturally engage in informal peer support, often negotiating meaning in mixed-language contexts. Collaborative Meaning-Making transforms these coping strategies into structured, pedagogically sanctioned activities, including bilingual case analyses,

group workshops, and translanguaging modules. The interpretive significance lies in legitimizing social learning as a cognitive resource: students are not merely practicing language; they are co-constructing understanding in ways that mirror authentic legal reasoning. Students' narratives indicate that collaborative settings reduced uncertainty, clarified misconceptions, and provided immediate corrective feedback. This aligns with Long's Interaction Hypothesis (1983), but the interpretation goes further: peer-mediated negotiation functions as both a linguistic scaffold and a confidence-building mechanism. By formalizing bilingual discourse, the intervention leverages existing competencies rather than imposing monolingual constraints, illustrating how the framework rationally adapts pedagogy to students' lived realities.

Authentic Task Engagement. Students consistently reported difficulty in translating classroom learning into professional contexts. Authentic Task Engagement addresses this gap by situating English use within criminology-relevant scenarios such as police reports, mock investigations, and crime-prevention presentations. Analysis of participants' reflections reveals that tasks anchored in real-world contexts enhanced both comprehension and purposeful expression, transforming English from an abstract subject into a functional tool. This component operationalizes Hymes' (1972) communicative competence framework, but importantly, it is grounded in a rational interpretation of lived experience: learners need tasks that reflect their disciplinary identity and anticipated professional roles. By integrating subject matter and language instruction (Coyle et al., 2010; Kasahun, 2021), authentic tasks promote and build cognitive and motivational alignment between language learning and professional formation, reinforcing the idea that competence emerges through contextually meaningful action rather than through decontextualized drills.

Leveraging Multimodality. Participants highlighted reliance on digital media, videos, and interactive tools to support comprehension. Leveraging Multimodality responds to these articulated needs by offering diverse input channels—AI tools, subtitled legal videos, simulations, and digital corpora. Interpretation of these data suggests that multiple modes of representation not only aid understanding but also support learner autonomy, allowing students to revisit complex content at their own pace and according to their preferred cognitive strategies. The rational significance is twofold: multimodal resources reduce the bottleneck of linear textual processing, and they scaffold visual and experiential understanding, aligning with Sharma and Giannakos' (2020) findings on cognitive benefits of sensory-rich learning. In criminology education, this is particularly critical, as learners must visualize procedural sequences and situational contexts, indicating that multimodality functions as both a comprehension aid and an accessibility mechanism, democratizing exposure to specialized language.

Emotional and Experiential Support. Finally, participants consistently described anxiety and low self-efficacy when required to communicate orally in legal English. Emotional and Experiential Support addresses these affective dimensions through reflective journals, oral workshops, simulations, and supportive feedback. Interpretively, these interventions do not merely "teach" language; they create psychologically safe environments that allow students to

experiment, take risks, and build communicative confidence incrementally. Students' reflections illustrate the mechanisms described by Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis (1992): reduced anxiety and sustained motivation are directly linked to increased participation and risk-taking in language use. Moreover, experiential engagement supports professional identity formation: learners begin to perceive themselves as competent legal communicators capable of articulating reasoning and engaging in crime-prevention discourse. The rational takeaway is that affective scaffolding is as critical as linguistic scaffolding for sustained communicative development.

Taken together, the SCALE framework exemplifies a holistic, phenomenologically grounded response to the complexities of Legal English learning. Each component—scaffolding, collaboration, authentic tasks, multimodality, and emotional support—addresses a distinct dimension of student experience while remaining interconnected. The interpretive analysis of participants' narratives demonstrates that effective interventions cannot treat language learning as purely cognitive; they must engage social interaction, professional relevance, multimodal accessibility, and affective readiness. Thus, SCALE transforms lived difficulties into structured pedagogical possibilities. It validates students' coping strategies, situates English learning within real professional contexts, and fosters identity formation as future law enforcers. By foregrounding students' experiences and rationally mapping them to instructional responses, the framework offers a context-sensitive, socially mediated model for improving legal communication in multilingual criminology education.

4. Conclusions

This section presents the study's key conclusions and their implications, illustrating how the findings inform both practical strategies for improving Legal English instruction in criminology and a theoretical understanding of language learning in multilingual professional contexts. The experiences of criminology students indicate that difficulties in Legal English are multidimensional, encompassing linguistic complexity, emotional barriers, bilingual cognitive processing, and instructional gaps. These factors collectively shape students' comprehension, participation, and engagement in legal discourse. Theoretically, these findings affirm Cummins' dual-processing burden and Krashen's Affective Filter, demonstrating that language learning in specialized fields involves both cognitive and affective dimensions.

Practically, this highlights the need for criminology programs to integrate vocabulary scaffolding, confidence-building exercises, and contextualized Legal English instruction, rather than treating language as a peripheral or supplementary skill. Students also demonstrated strong learner agency, employing strategies such as peer discussion, translanguaging, self-regulation, and digital resources to negotiate meaning and maintain engagement with complex legal content. Theoretically, this aligns with Long's Interaction Hypothesis and translanguaging frameworks, emphasizing the importance of interaction and multilingual repertoires in language development. In practical terms, educators can formalize these coping strategies into structured pedagogical practices, including collaborative learning, multilingual scaffolding, and

multimodal resource integration, thereby transforming students' adaptive behaviors into sustained communicative competence. The findings further underscore that effective English communication development in criminology requires contextualized, experiential, and emotionally supportive program design that integrates language learning with professional practice. This is consistent with the ESP (English for Specific Purposes) and CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) perspectives, which advocate aligning disciplinary knowledge with language instruction. Practically, this calls for initiatives such as bridging programs, authentic criminology tasks, oral communication workshops, and multimodal instructional materials, aimed at cultivating confident, competent legal communicators ready for crime-prevention and law-enforcement contexts.

5. Recommendations

Based on these conclusions, the study proposes several pedagogical and policy-oriented strategies: Implement scaffolding techniques, multimodal learning strategies, collaborative exercises, and alignment of the ESP curriculum with disciplinary content to strengthen students' English proficiency in legal contexts. Institutionalize Legal English support programs at the college level, integrate language development within criminology curricula, and provide professional development for faculty to address disciplinary language challenges. Conduct longitudinal studies to track language development over time, incorporate classroom observations to complement self-reported data, and explore similar phenomena in diverse geographic and institutional contexts to enhance generalizability.

6. Limitations of the Study

This study focused on the experiences of criminology undergraduates in selected provincial colleges in Cotabato regarding challenges in English communication within legal education and crime-prevention contexts. While the research provides valuable insights, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the sample size was small and context-specific, limiting the generalizability of the findings to other regions or institutions. Second, the study relied primarily on interviews and focus group discussions, which may be influenced by self-report bias, social desirability, or participants' willingness to share experiences openly.

Third, researcher subjectivity could influence the interpretation of qualitative data despite efforts to maintain credibility and confirmability. Finally, the study did not include direct classroom observation, which could have provided additional evidence regarding language use, participation patterns, and instructional interactions. Despite these limitations, the study offers practical insights for ESP curriculum development, pedagogical strategies, and policy formulation, highlighting areas where institutional support and structured interventions can enhance criminology students' English communication competence. Future studies that incorporate larger, more diverse samples and multiple data sources are encouraged to further validate and expand these findings.

Supplementary Details

Supplementary Materials & Data availability statement (If Applicable):

This study does not include supplementary files such as additional figures, tables, or videos. The primary data consisted of transcripts from interviews and focus group discussions with twelve purposively selected criminology undergraduates from tertiary schools in the Second District of Cotabato Province, Philippines. These transcripts, which form the textual corpus for phenomenological analysis, are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request to ensure transparency and reproducibility.

Author Contributions:

All authors contributed substantially to the conceptualization, execution, and writing of this study. Life Gabriel F. Osumo, LPT, MEd-LT, CRS, supervised the project, provided guidance on study design, methodology, and manuscript refinement. Maria Fe B. Doong, LPT, MIE, and Joanna Mae C. Mojica, LPT, contributed to participant recruitment, data collection, transcript management, and coding. Dhan Clay Kristoffer P. Panolino, LPT, assisted in data analysis, thematic interpretation, and manuscript revision. All authors reviewed and approved the final manuscript and take responsibility for its content.

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Institutional Review Board Statement

This study involved interviews with human participants and adhered to institutional ethical guidelines. Ethical approval was secured from the appropriate review board at Central Mindanao Colleges.

Informed Consent Statement:

Informed consent was obtained from all participants. The study's objectives, procedures, voluntary nature, and participants' rights to withdraw at any time were clearly explained. Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained by coding participants' identities in all records and analyses.

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The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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