

A Study on the Effectiveness of the TV Series of “Law & Order: Special Victims Unit (SVU)” In Learning Legalese through English Vs Malay Language Subtitles among Law Students

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ABSTRACT

English has become the working language of legal study in Malaysia, yet law students must still master a dense professional register, “legalese”, that classroom hours alone rarely cover. This study examines whether the legal drama “Law & Order: Special Victims Unit” (SVU) can support that learning, and how the choice between English and Malay subtitles shapes the experience. Drawing on Krashen’s Input Hypothesis and Vygotsky’s Sociocultural Theory, the research asks why law students prefer English subtitles, what linguistic challenges they meet, and how they perceive the show’s English legalese. A qualitative design was used, with semi-structured interviews conducted with five law students at Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Shah Alam and analysed thematically. Participants showed a clear and consistent preference for English subtitles, mainly because the show’s terminology mirrored the language of their coursework, felt more accurate than Malay renderings, and spared them the effort of mental translation. They still met difficulties with fast courtroom dialogue and terms specific to the United States legal system, which they managed by pausing to look words up, inferring meaning from context, and rewatching scenes. Students perceived the legalese as demanding but rewarding, describing the viewing as a “semi-educational” activity that reinforced classroom learning. The findings suggest that authentic legal drama, paired with target-language subtitles, is a useful supplement to formal legal English instruction.

Keywords: legalese, subtitles, legal English, second language acquisition, Law & Order: SVU

INTRODUCTION

English now functions as the lingua franca of international legal practice, a role that raises the stakes of English proficiency for law students in countries where it is not the first language (Marlina & Xu, 2018). In Malaysia, legal education is delivered largely in English, but the profession itself is bilingual: court proceedings often run in Malay, while case law, textbooks and coursework remain in English. Law students therefore sit at an awkward junction. They are expected to command a specialised register, legalese, that combines technical vocabulary, Latin terms and complex syntax, yet the classroom offers limited time for the kind of extended exposure such mastery requires (Pujadas & Muñoz, 2019).

Entertainment media has drawn growing interest as a way to widen that exposure. Watching authentic English television is thought to make language learning easier and more convenient than traditional instruction,

because it presents real conversation in a memorable context (Amelia & Abidin, 2018). Subtitles add a second channel of support, linking spoken dialogue to written text and helping viewers decode unfamiliar words (Oktapiani et al., 2024). “Law & Order: SVU” is a strong candidate for this purpose. Its courtroom scenes, interrogations and professional exchanges offer sustained, realistic use of legal language, and television dialogue of this kind has been shown to serve genuine pedagogical ends (Vieira & Lança, 2014).

The choice of subtitle language complicates the picture. English subtitles give direct access to the original terminology, but their density may raise the cognitive load and push viewers towards the apparent comfort of Malay (Matthew, 2024). Malay subtitles ease comprehension of the storyline, yet they risk simplifying or mistranslating the very legal terms a law student needs. This tension, between the accessibility of the first language and the fidelity of the target language, sits at the heart of the study.

The problem carries a further twist. Complex information increases cognitive load, straining working memory and slowing comprehension (Matthew, 2024), so the unfamiliar or highly specific jargon of a legal drama can become a barrier for viewers with limited proficiency. A law student who genuinely wants to improve her English may therefore drift towards Malay subtitles for short-term ease, at the cost of the target-language exposure she is seeking. English proficiency is increasingly expected of the profession, and media is now a well-studied route to it, but the effectiveness of English media for acquiring legalese specifically has had little attention. Understanding why students choose one subtitle language over the other, and what they gain and lose by it, is a practical question for anyone designing legal English instruction.

The existing literature leaves several gaps. Research confirms that subtitles help general language learning (Gernsbacher, 2015; Vanderplank, 2019), but little of it addresses how bilingual subtitles work in a legal setting, or how the cognitive effort of processing subtitles affects the learning of a register as precise as legalese (Perego et al., 2010). There is also scant comparative evidence on native-language (L1) versus target-language (L2) subtitles in law, despite the structural distance between English and Malay legal discourse (Alcaraz & Hughes, 2014). This study addresses that gap by asking how law students themselves experience the two options.

Three research questions guide the work:

1. What are the reasons for law students’ preference for English subtitles when watching “Law & Order: SVU”?
2. What linguistic challenges do law students face in understanding legal issues in the series?
3. How do they perceive the use of English legalese in the series in terms of understanding and comprehension?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Media, Subtitles and Language Learning

Television series have become a common resource for language learners, and their reach has grown alongside their popularity (Muthusamy et al., 2020). English-language shows expose learners to natural conversation among fluent speakers, supporting listening and speaking skills that are difficult to build through textbooks alone. A systematic review of English media exposure for ESL learners found consistent benefits for language development, which helps explain the growing interest in entertainment as a teaching resource (Ahmad Zaidi et al., 2023). Within legal education specifically, a narrative format allows students to meet legal concepts in context rather than as isolated definitions, so a series such as “Law & Order: SVU” can both entertain and instruct.

Subtitles are central to this effect. By pairing sound with text, they help learners connect what they hear to what they read, which aids vocabulary acquisition and retention (Danan, 2004). Ossei-Owusu (2021) reports that students who watched legal episodes with subtitles retained legal terms more readily, and Hestiana and Anita (2022) stress that vocabulary is the foundation of effective language use, noting that subtitles in either

the first or the target language can offset comprehension difficulties when a programme's vocabulary outruns a learner's current level. The open question is not whether subtitles help, but which language of subtitle serves a specialised register best.

Legal drama occupies a particular niche within this literature. "Law & Order: SVU" offers law students a chance to meet legal concepts inside a narrative rather than a lecture, so it can educate audiences about legal issues while it entertains them. The value of such media reaches beyond vocabulary. Audiovisual material can support critical thinking and contextual learning by placing information within a story that gives it shape and consequence (Berk, 2009), which matters for a discipline built on reasoning as much as terminology. Set against this promise, the empirical base is thin. The pedagogical worth of legal drama, and in particular the comparative effect of English and Malay subtitles on legal vocabulary and reasoning, has rarely been tested directly, which is the space this study enters.

Theoretical Framework

Two theories frame the study. Krashen's Input Hypothesis holds that language is acquired chiefly through exposure to "comprehensible input" pitched just beyond the learner's present competence, the level he labels "i+1" (Chen, 2022). What matters is grasping meaning rather than parsing grammar (Gong, 2023), and when input is understood and plentiful, the next stage of difficulty is supplied almost automatically (Lichtman & VanPatten, 2021). Applied here, English subtitles offer an ideal form of input: they carry the legal vocabulary itself, the "+1", while the dual stream of audio and text keeps that vocabulary within reach. Krashen also separates acquisition, a subconscious process driven by meaningful communication, from learning, the explicit knowledge built through formal study, a distinction that helps explain why watching a drama can complement, rather than merely repeat, classroom instruction (Lichtman & VanPatten, 2021).

Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory supplies the social dimension that Krashen's cognitive account leaves aside. On this view, cognitive development occurs through interaction with more knowledgeable others within the Zone of Proximal Development, the space between what a learner can do alone and what they can achieve with guidance (Ginting et al., 2025). Effective teaching of academic concepts builds on everyday understanding (van der Veer, 2007), and viewers engage with subtitled content actively, decoding and interpreting rather than receiving it passively (Novytska et al., 2025). Watching in a group, or clarifying terms with a lecturer, lets students negotiate meaning together and turn everyday comprehension into sophisticated legal knowledge.

The two theories are complementary rather than competing. Krashen explains how the media delivers the raw material of acquisition; Vygotsky explains how social interaction consolidates it. Read together, they describe a cycle in which comprehensible input builds linguistic competence, which then supports richer collaborative discussion, which in turn deepens the learner's command of legalese. Figure 1 sets out this conceptual framework.

Figure 1. Conceptual framework of legal English acquisition



Legal English and the Malaysian Context

Malaysia's bilingual legal system gives the subtitle question particular force. Powell and Saw (2021) argue that the country offers a distinctive case study in how common law adapts to a multilingual setting, where English and Malay operate side by side in legal practice. Structural and terminological differences between English and Malay legal discourse mean that a student relying on Malay subtitles may understand the plot while missing the precise legal sense (Alcaraz & Hughes, 2014). Subtitling also carries an equity argument: it broadens access to educational content for learners of differing proficiency (Marcus-Quinn, 2020). Yet the pedagogical value of legal drama, and the comparative effect of English against Malay subtitles on legal vocabulary, remains under-researched, which is the gap this study sets out to explore.

METHODOLOGY

The study used a qualitative design to explore how law students experience English and Malay subtitles when learning legal English through "Law & Order: SVU". A qualitative approach suits questions about perception and meaning, where the aim is depth of understanding rather than statistical generalisation (Lim, 2024). The focus throughout was on how students interpreted and retained legal terminology under each subtitle condition.

Participants were recruited by purposive sampling, a technique chosen to secure a spread of perspectives across levels of study and English proficiency. Five law students at UiTM Shah Alam took part, drawn from first year through to final year. Two criteria governed selection: current enrolment in a law programme at the university, and prior experience of watching the series. The second criterion was essential, since only students who had watched "Law & Order: SVU" could speak to subtitle preference, linguistic difficulty and their perception of the show's legalese from direct experience.

Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews, a format that pairs a set of guiding questions with the freedom to follow up and probe, so it can be understood as a conversation with a purpose (Fife Council, 2018). The interview guide contained nine questions mapped to the three research questions, covering motivation for choosing English subtitles, comprehension strategies, and perceptions of legalese. Interviews were conducted over Google Meet, with participants' consent to audio recording. Ethical approval for the study was granted by the UiTM Research Ethics Committee (REC) before data collection began.

Analysis followed a thematic procedure. Recordings were first transcribed verbatim by the researcher, which allowed close familiarity with the data. The transcripts were then cross-checked with the assistance of Gemini AI, used as a speech-to-text aid to catch misheard words and omissions, before a fellow researcher reviewed them for accuracy and a subject-matter expert validated them against the original audio. The researcher read the finalised transcripts repeatedly, recorded initial notes on recurring ideas, coded the data, and grouped related codes into broader themes organised around the research questions. Representative quotations were retained to illustrate each theme.

Several measures supported reliability and validity. Verbatim transcription anchored the data in participants' own words; the layered review, peer validation followed by expert verification, guarded against misinterpretation; and a documented record of coding decisions made the analytical trail auditable. Participant anonymity was maintained throughout, encouraging candid responses and supporting the credibility of the findings. Participants are identified below by codes, P1 to P5.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The interviews produced consistent accounts across the five participants. Findings are presented by research question, with representative quotations, and are discussed in relation to the two guiding theories. Table 1 summarises the main themes.

Reasons for Preferring English Subtitles

Every participant preferred English subtitles, and their reasons clustered around four themes: alignment with coursework, perceived accuracy, naturalness, and the avoidance of translation.

The strongest driver was the match between the show's language and the students' own studies. Because law at UiTM is taught in English, the terminology in the series echoed the language of the classroom. As P2, a final-year student, put it, the legal terminology in the show "is aligned closely to the language that I use in my classroom", which helped her "better understand and follow the dialogue". P1 made the same connection, noting that studying law in English made the English subtitles easier to follow than a Malay alternative.

Accuracy was the second theme. Students trusted English subtitles to preserve legal meaning that Malay renderings tended to lose. P4 preferred English subtitles because "they're more accurate especially when it comes to understanding the legal terms, because Malay subtitles sometimes miss the details or they oversimplify it". P5 found Malay subtitles "a bit awkward" when set against the original terms.

A third group of reasons was more personal. P3, who grew up in an English-speaking household, said English subtitles simply "feels more natural". Others described a habit of watching English media that made the choice automatic. Related to this was the fourth theme, the wish to avoid mental translation. P1 explained that Malay subtitles forced her to "translate it in English" in her head, so direct English subtitles were "better for me". For most participants the preference was, in their own words, "a bit of both": a natural inclination that also served the deliberate goal of improving their legal English.

These accounts align closely with Krashen's Input Hypothesis. English subtitles supplied comprehensible input in the target register, and because that input matched the students' existing competence in legal English, it sat squarely in the "i+1" zone where acquisition is most likely. The preference for accuracy is telling: students intuitively resisted the simplification of Malay subtitles because it stripped away the precise "+1" vocabulary they wanted to acquire.

Linguistic Challenges and Coping Strategies

A preference for English subtitles did not remove difficulty. Participants reported two recurring obstacles: unfamiliar terminology, particularly terms specific to the United States legal system, and the pace of courtroom dialogue. P1 could follow basic procedures such as how a charge or an arrest works, but found some "United States specific terms" hard to grasp. P2 noted that comprehension "varies", with dense procedural passages demanding full concentration, especially where the American system diverged from the Malaysian one.

Students met these challenges through active engagement rather than passive viewing. Four strategies recurred. They inferred meaning from context; they paused the show to look up terms online, a step P1, P2 and P4 all described; they rewatched or relistened to difficult scenes, as P3 did until she understood; and, where a term was peripheral or did not apply to Malaysian law, they settled for the "general idea" rather than full comprehension. P4 rewound "pretty often" during fast courtroom scenes, finding that it helped her "catch small details" she had missed.

The frequency of these strategies varied with the learner and the scene. P1 found rewinding "not that frequent", reserved for courtroom passages covering terms she had not yet studied, whereas P4 used it routinely. P5 made it conditional on "curiosity as well as my free time", rewatching only when English slang defeated her. The jurisdictional gap between the United States and Malaysian systems ran through every account. It was the single most common source of difficulty, yet participants did not treat it as a wall. P5 observed that Malaysia's adoption of many common law principles let her follow most of the legal issues, and P2 found that although specific terms differed, "the fundamental concepts are often similar", so her legal training still carried her through the reasoning. The difficulty, in other words, was localised to surface terminology rather than to the underlying logic of the law.

This active processing supports Vygotsky's account of learning as an effortful, mediated activity. Pausing to research a term, or returning to a scene, is a form of self-scaffolding, and P3's practice of searching for terms because the show "relates to my studies" shows learners bringing their academic context to bear on the media. The persistence of difficulty even with English subtitles also confirms that legalese is a demanding register, sensitive to jurisdictional difference in a way general vocabulary is not.

Perceptions of English Legalese: Understanding and Comprehension

Participants perceived the show's legalese as challenging but manageable, and they credited their legal studies for that balance. All five agreed that their coursework made the series easier to follow. P2 described her comfort with the vocabulary and legal reasoning, which let her "appreciate the show on a deeper level" and turned viewing into a "semi-educational experience" in which she analysed the arguments and compared them with her classes. P1 offered a neat illustration, contrasting her own comprehension with that of her sister, an IT student, who came to her to make sense of the show's procedures. For P5, the change was developmental: terms that were beyond her in secondary school became "much easier" once she was in law school.

Comprehension was not uniform. P3 described an "all or nothing" pattern in which easy material was straightforward but harder passages were genuinely difficult, resolved only by further exposure. P4 and P5 both noted that terms with no Malaysian equivalent remained opaque, though Malaysia's adoption of common law principles carried them through much of the content. Importantly, subtitles were seen as indispensable to whatever comprehension students achieved: P3 judged the show "simpler to understand because it comes with subtitles" and expected fast scenes to be very hard without them.

Read through both theories, these perceptions show the cycle the conceptual framework predicts. Comprehensible input from the subtitled drama built on the students' existing legal knowledge, the Vygotskian foundation of prior learning, and produced engagement that several described in affective terms, with P3 saying the show made her "fall in love" with the subject. The "semi-educational" framing captures the meeting point of the two theories: rich input, processed actively and anchored in prior study, moved students beyond passive viewing towards a more confident command of legal English.

Summary of Themes

Table 1 draws the findings together across the three research questions.

Table 1. Summary of themes and representative evidence across the three research questions.

Research question	Key themes	Representative evidence
RQ1. Reasons for preferring English subtitles	Alignment with coursework; perceived accuracy; naturalness and habit; avoiding mental translation.	"The legal terminology used in the show is aligned closely to the language that I use in my classroom" (P2).
RQ2. Linguistic challenges and coping strategies	United States-specific terms and the jurisdictional gap; fast courtroom dialogue. Managed by pausing and looking up terms, inferring from context, rewatching, and settling for the general idea.	"There are some United States specific terms that are hard for me to grasp" (P1).
RQ3. Perceptions of English legalese	Legal studies aid comprehension; subtitles seen as indispensable; strong engagement with the material.	"It turns watching TV into a semi-educational experience" (P2).

IMPLICATIONS AND LIMITATIONS

Taken together, the findings point to a modest but practical role for legal drama in legal English instruction. "Law & Order: SVU" gave students direct exposure to courtroom procedure and legal argument, and English subtitles helped them recognise and retain specialised terms while sustaining the motivation to keep watching demanding content. For educators, this suggests that carefully chosen legal media, paired with target-language subtitles and followed by guided discussion, could complement the theoretical work of the classroom rather than compete with it. The consistent preference for English subtitles also offers a simple, actionable message for students who wish to build their legal English: the harder option tends to be the more useful one.

The study's limitations should temper these claims. The sample was small and drawn from a single institution, so the findings describe the experiences of these five students rather than law students in general. The reliance on self-reported interview data introduces the usual scope for subjective bias, since a learner's sense of how much a subtitle helped need not match the measurable effect on comprehension or retention. The study was also purely qualitative and captured perception rather than performance. A natural next step would be a quantitative study that measures the effect of English against Malay subtitles on legal vocabulary gain directly, alongside comparisons with other forms of legal media such as documentaries or recorded proceedings. Such work would test, rather than assume, the pedagogical value that these students so consistently reported.

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