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LINGUISTIC CAPITAL, AI LITERACY, AND EPISTEMIC ACCESS: RESEARCH STUDENTS' LIVED EXPERIENCES OF AI-ASSISTED ACADEMIC WRITING IN TEACHER EDUCATION

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Abstract

The use of AI writing tools to aid academic writing by research students in Teacher Education programmes in Punjab, Pakistan, is becoming more common. This adoption is driven by concerns about poor academic mastery of English, superficial AI literacy, and limited familiarity with disciplinary discourse. This phenomenological paper examines the lived experiences of 22 research students, which were conducted by using the three-interview series developed by Seidman and transcribed with the help of TurboScribe AI. The data were analysed in NVivo through AI-assisted coding. Three themes appeared: the burden of linguistic capital deficit on academic identity and self-concept, superficial AI interaction characterised by dependency rather than development, and discontinuous access to epistemic conventions in teacher education research writing. The paper suggests that formal, pedagogically structured integration of AI is needed to reframe AI as a language scaffold on the disciplinary lines. The results have implications for the Teacher Education curriculum design and formative assessment, and the institutional AI policy within Pakistani higher education settings.

Keywords: AI Writing Tools, Linguistic Capital, Epistemic Access, Teacher Education, Phenomenology, Punjab, Academic Writing

Introduction

Research writing in English is one of the most demanding skills expected of research students in tertiary institutions worldwide (Creswell & Poth, 2023; Hyland, 2015). This is especially challenging for students in postcolonial, multilingual settings, like Pakistan. English serves also as the language of instruction, the language used to publish scholarly work, and the primary marker of educational authority in the institutions of teacher education, all at the same time (Tamim, 2014; Zaman & Khan, 2024). The central challenge for research students enrolled in the Teacher Education programmes in Punjab is how to generate disciplinary knowledge (Rasheed, Qureshi, & Muhammad, 2026) and how to encode the knowledge in a language that has a high social and symbolic importance to the students and the society at large (Bourdieu, 1991). The tension between epistemic ambition and linguistic constraint is not trivial. It is internalised in the processes of conducting and evaluating teacher education research.

New possibilities have been introduced to research students with this tension through the introduction of AI writing tools, such as ChatGPT,

Grammarly, QuillBot, and Paperpal (Saleem et al., 2025; Tseng & Warschauer, 2023). These applications provide grammatical correction, paraphrasing, restructuring sentences, and stylistic editing that all deal with superficial linguistic challenges (Wale & Kassahun, 2024). Those surveys that have been conducted in the same multilingual contexts, like Saudi Arabia, Indonesia, and Pakistan, have shown that students using AI writing software experience a higher level of confidence and writing efficiency (Khan, 2023). However, the same research also reveals a problem that does not go away: students tend to utilise AI as an automatic text generator rather than a cognitive scaffold, and their texts, in turn, are made to sound fluent with no disciplinary arguments being provided in them (Jandildinov & Yersultanova, 2024; Muhammad, Ahmad, & Qureshi, 2025).

This problem is aggravated by teacher education research writing in Pakistan, which requires the strict requirements of disciplinary scholarship. These characteristics of scholarship in this field are the transparency of the methodology, positionality, analytic hedging, and the conceptual precision (Muthukrishnan, 2024). Artificial intelligence has a habit of homogenising these differences, which gives rise to generically scholarly prose that fails to comply with the standards of the teacher education research published in peer-reviewed journals (Tseng & Warschauer, 2023). Research shows that students who are already unsure about their linguistic ability are in a position where they cannot critically evaluate AI output. They do not have metalinguistic knowledge that would help them determine whether a sentence is disciplinarily appropriate or just grammatically correct (Ito et al., 2023).

Although there is increasing research on the use of AI in academic writing by EFL learners, the research area is marked by a significant gap in empirical evidence. A limited number of studies have explored the lived experiences of research students, as opposed to undergraduates, who utilise AI writing tools in the particular setting of teacher education in South Asia (Picciano, 2024). The majority of the current research is based on the information provided in questionnaires or one-time interviews (Khan, 2023; Selim, 2024). These strategies capture attitudes and perceptions, but they do not reach the temporal, biographical, and meaning-rich aspects of how the research students develop their writing practices over time (Seidman, 2019). Besides, the idea of linguistic capital as developed by Bourdieu, though theoretically fruitful in terms of studying English inequality in Pakistani schools, has not been used to explore the intertwining of AI literacy and epistemic access in teacher

education research to date (Bourdieu, 1991; Tamim, 2014).

The proposed research is the analysis of the lived experiences of research students attending ITE programmes in Punjab, Pakistan, using AI writing tools to write academic texts. It puts those experiences into the intersection of linguistic capital constraints, AI literacy, and access to knowledge. The research uses the three-interview series of a phenomenological study to be able to do profound longitudinal research, reconstructing the experiences of the participants (Seidman, 2019). The question is informed by two research questions. To begin with, what is the process through which research students in the ITE institutions in Punjab reconstruct their academic writing experiences in English, and how does linguistic capital influence those experiences? Second, what does research on students' meaning making of their use of AI writing tools in the context of their epistemic access to teacher education research discourse? The paper goes in the following order. A conceptual literature review integrates the research on linguistic capital and academic writing, AI literacy in non-native English-speaking settings, and postcolonial higher educational access to epistemic knowledge.

The methodology section outlines the phenomenological approach used by Seidman (2019) and the procedures utilised. The findings are described thematically, and then a discussion is provided to relate the findings to the literature and identify policy and practice implications.

Literature Review

Linguistic Capital and Academic Writing in Pakistan

The notion of linguistic capital introduced by Pierre Bourdieu offers an effective analytical framework for structural disparities in academic writing among Pakistani research students (Bourdieu, 1991). Linguistic capital is the socially recognised ability to communicate using an official language, especially the one that is prestigious in academic circles. This is the exact position that English takes in Pakistan. It is not only a pedagogic language but an indicator of intellectual status, membership in an institution, and academic power (Tamim, 2014; Zaman & Khan, 2024). Students with Urdu or Punjabi-based educational backgrounds have much lower English linguistic capital when joining ITE programmes compared to students in elite institutions of the private sector. The difference is not a matter of individual effort, but a consequence of compounded systemic inequality reproduced across generations (Nasir, 2023; Tamim, 2014).

Disciplinary academic writing requires more than grammatical competence. It involves the regulation of language hedging, position

indicators, argument structure, and genre-specific conventions, which combine to make up disciplinary discourse (Hyland, 2015). In teacher education, research students are required to exhibit the mastery of analytic language, transparency in methodology, and learning reflexivity. The requirements are especially challenging to fulfil when the basic literacy has been acquired in a language that does not hold so much institutional power (Zaman & Khan, 2024). It does not merely result in poor academic performance. It is a perception of loss of disciplinary belonging, the impression that scholarly knowledge creation belongs to others (Omodan & Ngubane, 2026). Such an emotional aspect of linguistic capital shortage has had a lack of coverage in Pakistani higher education literature.

AI Literacy and Non-Native Academic Writing

The concept of AI literacy refers to the skills of comprehending, analysing and knowing how to apply AI tools to particular contexts of tasks in a purposeful manner (Muthukrishnan, 2024). As an element of the academic writing community, AI literacy mandates students to be able to prompt AI tools, critically evaluate the output, and incorporate AI support without losing the voice of an author or the accuracy of a discipline (Jacob et al., 2024). These skills demand strong cognitive and metacognitive capacity, particularly from students already navigating the demands of academic English (Tseng & Warschauer, 2023).

It is continually shown that non-native English-speaking students tend to utilise AI writing tools for full-text generation rather than targeted editing (Ito et al., 2023; Selim, 2024). This pattern of surface-level AI use lowers the tool to a replacement for thinking. Students ask AI to write entire paragraphs, have little or no critical assessment of the output, and submit text that reflects the AI's generic scholarly register rather than their own developing voice (Jandildinov & Yersultanova, 2024). This tendency is supported by studies held in Pakistani ESL settings. According to the students, AI-generated English makes them feel fluent yet estranged from their own ideas (Khan, 2023; Saleem et al., 2025). This creates a vicious circle of dependency that prevents the development of disciplinary writing skills.

Academic confidence and agency are also a point of overlap with the concept of AI literacy. Students with lower linguistic capital are less inclined to edit or question AI output despite having suspicions that it might be inaccurate (Ito et al., 2023). This confusion has serious repercussions for research writing within the context of teacher education, where the language of the methodology has to be accurate and

epistemologically sound. Artificial intelligence often generates sections of methodology that sound plausible but misrepresent philosophical traditions or collapse distinctions between research paradigms (Tseng & Warschauer, 2023). An AI literacy curriculum based on pedagogy, which teaches students how to prompt and respond iteratively, and to revise critically, has been the most fruitful way to go in the future (Jacob et al., 2024; Muthukrishnan, 2024).

Epistemic Access and Disciplinary Discourse in Teacher Education

The concept of epistemic access extends beyond language acquisition to encompass students' capacity to engage meaningfully with the knowledge systems of an academic field. Epistemic access in teacher education implies the capability to think, argue and write within the conceptual frames that constitute the field, such as qualitative methodology, curriculum theory and critical pedagogy. This access is frequently blocked by the gatekeeping function of English-medium disciplinary discourse in ITE institutions in Punjab. The connection between AI use and epistemic access is both theoretically significant and practically urgent.

The linguistic barrier to writing academic texts can be reduced with the use of AI. Nevertheless, AI tools may also deepen epistemic exclusion by generating text that students reproduce without understanding and cannot defend intellectually (Omodan & Ngubane, 2026; Vučković & Sikimić, 2025). In a case where a research student provides an AI-generated section of the methodology that properly utilises the phrase "constructivist grounded theory" but fails to describe the meaning of constructivism, the tool has enabled linguistic access while widening the gap between textual performance and conceptual understanding. The recent literature on decolonial approaches to academic writing validates the fact that AI tools may either disrupt or uphold the epistemic hierarchies, depending entirely on the pedagogical context in which they are embedded (Omodan & Marongwe, 2024). The risk in the postcolonial higher education contexts is high. The AI tools, trained predominantly on Western academic corpora, risk reinforcing Anglophone epistemic norms while marginalising local knowledge traditions (Omodan & Ngubane, 2026; Vučković & Sikimić, 2025).

Methodology

Research Design

The research design that is used in this study is the three-interview phenomenological series (Seidman, 2019). The phenomenological approach is suitable since it foregrounds participants' lived experiences

and the meanings, they derive from them (Seidman, 2019). It is the phenomenological design that allows the researcher to get to this level of experience in a manner that survey or single-interview methods cannot reach (Creswell & Poth, 2023; Van Manen, 1990). The interpretative nature of the research questions is also a reason to use the qualitative approach. The research is not aimed at measuring the frequency or effectiveness of AI tool use. It aims to know how the participants reconstruct their experiences and construct meaning of their practice in a particular social and institutional setting (Patton, 2015).

Philosophical Paradigm

The work is based on the social phenomenology of Schutz (1967), which foregrounds the subjective meanings people apply to their daily experiences and the intersubjective processes through which those meanings are constituted (Schutz, 1967). According to Seidman (2019), the focus of this approach is on four phenomenological themes, namely the temporality and transience of human experience; subjective knowledge through participant lens; the lived experience as a basis of phenomena; and the focus on meaning and meaning in context (Seidman, 2019). Such themes are especially topical to research concerning how research students develop their writing practices across time and institutional contexts. The epistemological approach of the work is interpretive: the knowledge is generated when the participants recreate their experiences in conversation with the researcher (Schutz, 1967; Seidman, 2019). The ontological stance is that, based on the structural circumstances, such as the linguistic capital and institutional power, there are various, contextually determined realities of the academic writing experience.

Participants and Sampling

Purposive criterion sampling was used to select the participants (Patton, 2015). The inclusion criteria demanded that the participants had to be enrolled in MPhil or PhD programmes in ITE institutions in Punjab, Pakistan; had to have used at least one AI writing tool in academic writing; and had to be non-native English speakers (Creswell & Poth, 2023). Twenty-two participants who fit this criterion gave written consent to participate. The sample was selected by sampling five universities within the Punjab. Ages ranged from 24 to 41 years. There were 17 female and five male participants. Everyone had attended earlier education in Urdu medium or regional language medium schools before joining the university. To safeguard anonymity, pseudonyms have been employed. An example of a narrative demographic description is

presented here instead of a table in order to avoid exposing participants to privacy risks in a geographically compact context.

Data Collection: The Three-Interview Series

The information was gathered using a three-interview series of Seidman (2019), which was adapted for telephone delivery owing to geographic dispersion and institutional access constraints. The interviewees were all interviewed over the telephone, and the interviews lasted about 90 minutes. Initial transcription of all the recorded interviews was done using TurboScribe AI. The research team then listened to all transcripts and ensured that they were accurate relative to the original audio recordings and verbatim accurate (Seidman, 2019).

The Interview One concentrated on the participants' academic writing life histories. The participants were asked to reconstruct their learning trajectories, their first recollections of writing in English, and the institutional contexts that had influenced their language development. Instead of asking questions of the type of why, the researcher posed questions of the type of how and invited reconstruction rather than retrospective justification (Seidman, 2019). Interview Two was focused on the practical aspects of the current AI-mediated writing practises of the participants. Participants recreated specific episodes in descriptive granular detail: what they typed into an AI device, how they reacted to the result, how they revised it (or not), and how they used it in a formal academic work. Interview Three called upon the participants to contemplate the sense of these experiences. The participants were requested to answer what it meant to them that they were able to write in English with the help of AI, whether this practise strengthened or weakened their sense of scholarly identity, and what they perceived AI was doing to their growth as researchers (Seidman, 2019). The interviews took place after every three to seven days according to the recommendation of Seidman (2019), and the overall duration of the data collection process was about three weeks per participant.

Interviewing Techniques

The researcher adhered to the main principles of the phenomenological interviewing, as introduced by Seidman (2019): by listening more than talking, inviting participants to elaborate on what they had said instead of asking them to define broad topics, reconstructing the specific experiences of the participants, instead of generalising, allowing silence to act as an effective space of reflection, and not using leading questions during the interviews (Kvale & Brinkmann; Seidman, 2019). Care was taken regarding the use of an interview guide because it was adopted as

an orienting framework and not a strict script to ensure that the interview process was responsive to the personal experience of the participant (Mishler, 1986; Seidman, 2019).

Data Recording and Transcription

The interviews were all digitally recorded with the informed consent of the participants. The preliminary verbatim transcripts were generated by the TurboScribe AI and were verified by a bilingual research assistant who spoke English and Urdu.

The interpretive dimension of transcript punctuation was attended to, based on the argument by Kvale and Brinkmann (2015) that the way the speech is presented in writing determines the way it will later be read and analysed (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). Squared bracketed pauses, laughter, and hesitation markers were recorded to avoid interfering with the affective quality of participants' reconstructions. These nonverbal cues were an analytically important indicator, especially in Interview Three, where interviewees reflected on the meaning of AI-assisted writing.

Data Analysis Procedures

The two-phase analytical method of Seidman (2019) was applied using NVivo with AI-assisted coding to manage the volume and complexity of transcripts across three interview rounds and twenty-two participants (Jackson & Bazeley, 2024; Seidman, 2019). In Phase One, all the transcripts were read several times. Interesting passages were highlighted and annotated using NVivo's annotation function. This was a free and inductive phase of analytical orientation, which did not want to impose predetermined categories (Seidman, 2019; Wolcott, 1994). Phase Two involved labelling of passages that were of significant interest and deriving categories from the data. The AI coding functionality of NVivo proposed some initial cluster suggestions, which were subsequently reviewed, refined, and scrutinised by the research team against the verbatim transcripts (Jackson & Bazeley).

The study employed the thematic approach of Seidman (2019) in presenting the data of the interview. The excerpts were classified, and some of the connecting threads were found within and between participants' three-interview reconstruction. Descriptive and evocative theme labels were created to convey the experiential quality of participant descriptions. The making of interpretations continued to build up thematic links, to connect findings with the research questions and to relate interpretations with theoretical literature, all the while maintaining the focus on the participants' voices (Miles & Huberman,

1984; Seidman, 2019).

Trustworthiness and Rigour

The credibility was achieved by the long interaction during the three-interview series that enabled the participants to build trust and reconstruct their experiences in greater depth across sequential conversations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Eight participants participated in member checking by reviewing emergent theme summaries and confirmed that the summaries resonated with their lived experience. A systematic audit trail was used to achieve dependability: the interview guides, TurboScribe transcripts, verification records, NVivo project files, and coding decision logs were stored during the course of the study (Tracy, 2010). Confirmability was met by having the written reflexivity notes of the lead researcher, which were kept during data collection and analysis and reflected the researcher's positionality as a teacher educator in the same regional context (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The thick description of the situation in all three interview rounds supports transferability because readers in similar multilingual teacher education settings can determine applicability (Lincoln & Guba; Seidman, 2019).

Ethical Considerations

Data collection in the study was preceded by an institutional review board approval. Every participant signed an informed consent in writing, expressly indicating that they chose to participate on a voluntary basis, that the participation could be withdrawn at any point, and that the data would be used as intended without any penalties being imposed on them (Seidman, 2019). All the names of participants and institutional names are substituted with pseudonyms in the dataset and in the entire research outputs. Audio recordings and NVivo project files are stored in encrypted, password-protected institutional servers. The ethical principle of the I-Thou relational ethic used in the interviewing relationship is that of Seidman (2019), which considers the participants as ends and not as data sources. This principle guided the rhythm, tone, and form of the three interviews so that the participants experienced the process as meaningful reflection rather than data extraction (Seidman). In instances where the participants reported feeling stressed due to their academic experiences, the researcher acknowledged this and provided signposting to the support services that were available at the institution.

Findings

The thematic analysis generated three major themes, which are backed by sub-themes from the three-interview series. These themes cover the life history of the participants in the English-medium education, their

current English-mediated writing practices, and their interpretations of how the practices relate to their growth as teacher education researchers.

Theme 1: The Weight of Linguistic History on Scholarly Identity

Sub-theme 1.1: Schooling in the Shadow of English

Participants invariably reconstructed their early experiences of English as marked by incompetence and marginalisation. These histories did not simply accumulate but shaped scholarly identity. Nadia, a doctoral student at a state university in Gujranwala, has recounted her experience in school in the following manner:

I always knew that clever individuals spoke English. Our teachers used Punjabi to explain something and then wrote English on the board and instructed us to repeat it. I was imitating it for over a dozen years without an idea of what I was writing. By the time I got to university, I was imitating another person, and I referred to it as my learning. (Participant 3)

This reconstruction explains the process by Bourdieu (1991) of converting structural inequality into a perceived individual inadequacy (Bourdieu, 1991). English was not mentioned as a structural barrier by the participants. They talked about themselves as having personally failed to overcome it. In Interview Three, an MPhil student at Lahore, Zara, pondered what this sense of inadequacy meant to him:

Participant 7 said

The worst one is shame. Not the grammar mistakes. The humiliation of being aware that your ideas are good, but your words are not, and that one cannot express the former with the help of the latter, that there is no way to distinguish between the former and the latter.

The recurrence of linguistic shame across Interview One and Interview Three reconstructions substantiates the fact that linguistic capital deficit does not only exist as a constrained act but also as an identity-shaping experience which shapes how research students position themselves within academic knowledge production (Omodan & Ngubane, 2026).

Sub-theme 1.2: English as Gatekeeping, Not Communication

Participants identified a general difference between their everyday English and the one they needed in their academic research with regard to writing research works. They defined academic English as an exclusionary, distinct register that was there to filter rather than promote the sharing of knowledge. In Faisalabad, Hassan, a doctoral student, recreated a certain experience during his first semester of MPhil:

My literature review had brilliant ideas. I was able to describe them flawlessly in Urdu. My supervisor made me understand that the ideas

were okay, but the English was not acceptable. I was not aware of what had gone wrong. My sentences were grammatically correct. They were not, apparently, academic. That was when I realised that English in research is a different language from the English that I had been studying. (Participant 11)

This observation, according to which academic English is a unique disciplinary register which involves certain capital beyond the general language proficiency, directly correlates with the description of Hyland (2015) of academic discourse communities (Hyland, 2015). The experience of not fitting in, articulated across multiple participants, made the affective cost of disciplinary initiation very high.

Theme 2: Shallow AI Engagement and the Dependency Trap

Sub-theme 2.1: Prompting for Paragraphs, Not for Understanding

The most common pattern of AI use across the twenty-two participants was full-paragraph generation. According to the participants, they opened ChatGPT or a similar application, entered a general command, and took the result without much editing. This trend did not occur because of negligence. It represented a strategic measure to compensate for the conflicting forces of linguistic underachievement and time limits at school. Fareeha, an MPhil student in Multan, explained her working routine in Interview Two:

I would write something like, write a qualitative research design paragraph in teacher education research in Pakistan. It gives me something. I read it. I do not know quite a bit about it, but it sounds good. I submit it. My supervisor says it is good. I am a bad man; however, I just do not know what to do. (Participant 15)

This description shows the contradiction of the empty AI application: the instrument has created a passing grade and, at the same time, in a certain measure, it has also limited the development of the same competency which it seemed to show on the surface. The learner is recognised as the reward for the performance that she did not realise and failed to elaborate on. The final outcome, which was described by Participant 15 herself in Interview Three, is a further crisis of academic confidence.

Sub-theme 2.2: Inability to Evaluate AI Output

The participants said that there was a critical metalinguistic gap: participants could not always identify the AI-generated text as being disciplined, factual, and methodologically sound. This was also experienced during Interview Three by Tariq, who was a doctoral student in Rawalpindi:

The problem is that AI is highly confident. It writes like an expert. And I do not know now how to suspect whether the expert is not. So, I trust it. Then I find out later that it has cited a source that has never been written, or it has written about the way of research in a bad manner. But then it is too late, it is submitted.

This description represents one of the elements of low AI literacy: absence of the capability to differentiate fluency and accuracy (Ito et al.; Muthukrishnan). Fluent AI eliminates its mistakes because the human reader lacks the technical knowledge to challenge it. The implications of this gap directly concern the quality and credibility of scholarly work with students, as methodological accuracy is of particular concern therein (Tseng & Warschauer, 2023).

Theme 3: Fractured Epistemic Access and the Search for Disciplinary Belonging

Sub-theme 3.1: Writing Without Comprehension

The third theme involves the thoughts of the participants about the deeper meaning of AI-mediated writing. One of the major results in Interview Three was the experience of writing the text that participants did not fully understand and were unable to justify. This was not felt as academic dishonesty but as epistemic displacement: that one was occupying a scholarly space through a surrogate no longer reflecting one's own thinking (Omodan & Ngubane, 2026; Vučković & Sikimić). This experience was very vividly captured by a doctoral student in Sialkot, Sana:

And when I am using AI to write, the page fills up. It looks like research. However, it is when my supervisor requests that I clarify what I have written that I trip. The words were not mine. The thinking was not mine. I have a sheet of sentences on phenomenology, and I do not know what phenomenology really means to me as a researcher. I consider myself a fake in my own thesis. (Participant 22)

The reconstruction identifies the difference between textual and epistemic access that remains undertheorised in the AI and academic writing literature (Omodan & Marongwe, 2024; Omodan & Ngubane, 2026). AI tools might enable students to see the level of a field without providing them with a deep understanding of its conceptual underpinnings. This type of exclusion can be more harmful than linguistic exclusion alone, remaining undetected by assessors and unrecognised by students until a moment of intellectual accountability exposes the gap.

Sub-theme 3.2: Glimpses of Agency Through Structured Use

Dependency and displacement were not experienced by all of the participants. Only seven out of twenty-two participants said they used AI in more organised and intentional forms that seemed to help them in actual skill development. The common feature between these participants was that all of them had been provided with some kind of explicit instruction on how to use AI as an editing tool, rather than a writing tool, either by a supervisor or by a more advanced peer. Amna, who is a Lahore doctoral student, reconstructed her practice in the following way:

My supervisor said to me: Write your sentence, before it is very bad. And then request AI to enhance the language, but not the content. I began to do this, and all was transformed. I was able to notice the distinction between my sentence and the AI one. The comparison was my initial learning. I actually feel now that I am not just copying, but I am writing. (Participant 6)

This characterisation demonstrates that, bound together, prompting routines and cycles of improvement can be successful. The experience of Participant 6 demonstrates that the same AI tool that can make the situation dependent under no circumstances may become a real example of a scaffold when introduced into an ethical process of work. The difference is not in the tool that was used, but in whether there is or is not a pedagogical intervention.

Discussion

Interpretation of Findings

The three themes identified in this study show that linguistic capital deficit, shallow AI literacy, and fractured epistemic access are interrelated and mutually reinforcing constraints that ITE research students experience in Punjab. Linguistic history as a burden on Theme 1 is not one of those foundational issues that can be resolved by simply applying AI tools. It is an ongoing identity construction that determines how the students will deal with AI, to start with. Academic English as a gatekeeping device essentially leaves learners unable to use AI tools appropriately with pedagogical guarantees if they have not developed this critical confidence (Bourdieu, 1991; Omodan & Ngubane, 2026). There is a higher likelihood that they will defer to AI outputs because their educational histories have conditioned deference over critique.

Theme 2 supports and enriches tendencies reported in the wider writings on AI and EFL writing. Shallow AI use is not the behaviour of careless or unmotivated students. It is a logical reaction to intersecting

pressures: linguistic insufficiency, time constraints, assessment demands, and inadequate AI pedagogy (Jandildinov & Yersultanova, 2024; Selim, 2024). The failure to assess AI output, which is reported in Sub-theme 2.2, is a specific and underexplored dimension of AI literacy that is especially significant in research writing contexts. It demands explicit pedagogical focus on what could be called critical AI reading: the ability to ask disciplinary questions of generated text and not to accept fluency as a proxy for precision (Ito et al., 2023; Muthukrishnan, 2024).

Theme 3 introduces textual access without epistemic access as an independent and possibly more harmful educational phenomenon than linguistic exclusion alone. When the students submit AI-generated text which they are unable to justify or clarify, the evaluation system validates a performance that conceals a deeper exclusion. This discovery has significant implications for how teacher education institutions formulate and carry out research supervision and assessment. The limited instances of structured AI application in Sub-theme 3.2 confirm that it is not the tool that is the issue. The pedagogical situation in which it is applied defines whether it scaffolds epistemic access or substitutes for it.

Connection to Existing Literature

The results are consistent with and extend the recent literature on the use of AI by non-native English-speaking students in higher education. In line with the works focused on Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, the present study confirms that full-text generation is the most prevalent AI interaction among the students with lesser linguistic capital (Khan, 2023; Saleem et al., 2025). This paper, however, goes beyond that observation by placing it in a three-interview phenomenological context that uncovers the biographical origins and identity consequences of this pattern, dimensions that cross-sectional research cannot capture (Seidman, 2019; Selim, 2024).

The relation to the linguistic capital framework developed by Bourdieu confirms and extends earlier applications of this theory in Pakistani educational contexts (Nasir, 2023; Tamim, 2014). This study reveals that linguistic capital not only serves to block the way of writing but also serves as the identity-determining factor influencing how students place themselves in relation to AI tools. Lower linguistic capital students are not as eager to challenge, edit or discard AI output, which further strengthens the dependency cycle that has been named in the literature, yet not fully theorised (Ito et al., 2023; Tseng & Warschauer, 2023).

The article offers fresh empirical evidence on the topic of the epistemic access applied to decolonial and language-in-education research (Omodan & Marongwe, 2024; Omodan & Ngubane, 2026). The research demonstrates that when applied out of the context of pedagogical scaffolding, AI tools can fill a kind of epistemic simulation: the learner seems to inhabit the conceptual area of a field in the text they provide but are structurally denied entry to its knowledge practises. This difference should be given long-term theoretical interest in research.

The finding that the application of AI in writing in structured, supervisor-managed circumstances provides qualitatively different results is in line with the emerging pedagogical paradigms of AI implementation in writing training (Jacob et al., 2024; Kong et al., 2024; Muthukrishnan, 2024). Specifically, the self-regulated AI writing pedagogy, developed by Fang et al. (2024) and the controlled routines of prompting that are provided in the applied linguistics literature would fit perfectly into the picture of what Participant 6 presented as a transformative shift in her practice (Kong et al., 2024). This concurs with the idea that organised institutional action is the main response to shallow AI use, as a way of policy.

Implications

This research study has theoretical, practical, and methodological implications. In theory, the results advance the conceptualisation of epistemic access by distinguishing between textual access, the ability to generate disciplinarily appropriate text, and conceptual access, the ability to think and reason within a discipline's knowledge structures. The latter is a distinct and under-theorised form of epistemic exclusion that AI tools may enable the former while blocking the latter, and deserves dedicated scholarly attention (Omodan & Ngubane, 2026).

The findings suggest that practitioners in ITE programmes in Punjab and similar South Asian settings should introduce structured AI literacy components into research methods courses. The following elements must be specifically emphasised: controlled prompting routines, repetitive drafting phases with clear revision notes, and contrastive analysis using paired student-generated and AI-generated texts. Assessment design needs to shift away from evaluating only polished final output and incorporate process logs, draft comparisons, and written reflections on AI use. Such a change would prioritise process over product and reduce the motivation for wholesale AI text generation (Muthukrishnan, 2024).

The results indicate that there is a need for neither blanket ban on the

use of AI tools nor blanket acceptance of AI-assisted writing in the minds of the institutional decision makers who are involved in higher education in Pakistan. The evidence supports some middle-ground viewpoints: institutional policies involving AI should outline pedagogically sound guidelines to use the tool, introduce transparency regarding the use of AI assistants, and integrate AI literacy skills into supervision-based research programs (Dawn, 2026; Zaman & Khan, 2024).

Limitations

The findings have some boundaries to restrict the scope and transferability. It is noted that the twenty-two participants were sampled and were only those universities where the educational functions are provided for public sectors in Punjab, and private sector universities and other provinces were not included. They were also self-elected, that is, the student chose to speak about AI use, which carry the potential of selection bias for more reflective or academically inclined students than others. While a telephonic interview format was almost inevitable, this style of interviewing limited the interviewer's observation of nonverbal communication in the interview and may have limited disclosure in sensitive exchanges. Due to participants' academic demands, the three-interview series was performed in a shorter time (three weeks), without meeting Seidman's (2019) desired time interval. This compression could have caused a downwards reduction in "depth of reflection" in the third interview.

Future Research Directions

The findings from this study can guide three paths for further investigation. To begin with, a comparative phenomenological study sampling research students from both public and elite private-sector institutions in Punjab would clarify how class-based differences in linguistic capital shape AI literacy and epistemic access. Second, a longitudinal study following the same cohort across a full academic year, using Seidman's complete spacing protocol, would trace changes in AI use practices and epistemic confidence in relation to supervision and assessment. Third, a participatory action research study designing and evaluating an AI literacy intervention within an ITE research methods course, measuring impact on writing quality, metalinguistic awareness, and epistemic confidence, would translate the present findings into actionable pedagogical knowledge.

Conclusion

This research examined the lived experiences and meaning making of research students in ITE programmes in Punjab, Pakistan, at the

intersection of AI writing tool use, linguistic capital, and epistemic access. Twenty-two participants reconstructed their experiences through Seidman's three-interview series, producing rich and layered accounts of linguistic history, current AI practice, and meaning-making. Three themes emerged. The burden of linguistic history shapes scholarly identity in ways that precede and outweigh individual encounters with AI tools. Linguistic insecurity and the absence of pedagogical guidance produce shallow AI interaction and a dependency cycle that forecloses skill development. The most significant finding, fractured epistemic access, demonstrates that AI-produced textual performance can mask the structural exclusion of research students from disciplinary knowledge rather than addressing it.

These findings are significant as they reposition what may be usually viewed as an issue related to the use of technical AI or English competency as a problem related to structure and pedagogical concern to be responded to by the institution. ITE research students in Punjab no longer know how to write using AI. Most already do. The query is whether institutions will establish the conditions of AI use to allow a real epistemic access as opposed to simulating one. The results of the study show that pedagogically integrated development of AI literacy, with a particular focus on the placement of controlled prompting and metalinguistic awareness, is a feasible way to move on. Some of the burden to formulate those conditions is left to supervisors, curriculum designers, and institutional policymakers.

The directions in which research has been mapped out in the study request comparative, longitudinal and interventionist research. Pakistan needs to train educators who can think critically inside and about their profession. Both artificial intelligence and linguistic capital inequalities constitute a threat to that goal. The first step we can take towards breaking the shackles of these students is to know how they live.

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