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Research Article

'OMG! You used AI' – A critical exploration of linguistic stigmatization in the era of generative artificial intelligence

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ABSTRACT

The popularity of generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) in higher education institutions has sparked significant debate among scholars, lecturers, markers, and students. Reactions range from enthusiasm to concern. On the one hand, GenAI is embraced for its incidental benefits in language learning; and, on the other, it is met with resistance due to issues such as reduced cognitive engagement, technophobia, and fears of academic dishonesty. An area of concern involves the emergence and frequent recurrence of certain linguistic features and vocabulary associated with GenAI texts. This study explores the stigmatization of these linguistic patterns in an open distance e-learning (ODeL) context and explores how their usage influences perceptions of students' work. A case study design was used in this mixed-methods approach. Data were collected through an online questionnaire distributed to students and an open-ended evaluation form completed by markers. The study is grounded in the framing theory, which examines how GenAI content is presented in academic contexts, either as unethical and inauthentic or as a tool for empowerment. The findings reveal that markers have developed biases against linguistic features commonly associated with GenAI and students use GenAI to improve their writing. Although GenAI can be a useful linguistic aid, ethical use and transparent disclosure are critical to maintain academic integrity. These findings call for the development of clear institutional guidelines and marker training to ensure fair and informed assessment in the age of GenAI in ODeL.

Keywords: academic dishonesty, AI literacy, AI stigmatization, generative artificial intelligence, GenAI vocabulary, open distance e-learning

INTRODUCTION

The integration of generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) in open distance e-learning (ODeL) higher education institutions (HEIs) has sparked ongoing debate and scholarly division which includes both interest and controversy. On one side of the debate, critics argue that overreliance on GenAI tools contributes to cognitive decline, promotes academic dishonesty, lack of voice, and encourages unethical practices (Lee et al. 2025; Nguyen, 2025; Samala et al., 2025). In addition, those who use GenAI are usually stigmatized, labelled as not being 'true academics,' and seen as bypassing the intellectual rigor expected in HEIs (Dergaa et al., 2023; Luo, 2024). In contrast, other scholars advocate for the pedagogical value and innovation of GenAI, as

it is a futuristic tool with great potential for the enhancement of academic learning (Bannister 2024; Fathi et al. 2024; Giray et al., 2025). GenAI is praised for: its ability to structure arguments coherently, interactive learning, introducing students to new vocabulary, and to demonstrate contextual word usage (Noroozi et al. 2024; Sahu, 2024). This is especially beneficial for students who are not first-language (FL) speakers of English or who speak English as an additional language (EAL), as GenAI tools can scaffold their understanding of academic discourse and enhance their writing fluency (Chen et al., 2022; Law, 2024). However, the benefits of GenAI are not equally accessible to all students. Those in well-resourced contexts are more likely to benefit due to greater digital access and technological literacy, while students in under-resourced contexts risk being left behind, which accelerates the digital divide (Hendawy, 2024; Maloy & Gattupalli, 2024). The emergence of polished, error free responses raise a critical question: how can we distinguish between AI-generated and human generated content? It is worth pointing out that newer generations of GenAI come pre-equipped with a humanizing function. This function makes students' work appear more natural and authentic to bypass gatekeepers' scrutiny. Some markers now turn to detection tools such as Sapling and QuillBot to identify GenAI usage, but these tools are not always reliable and may further stigmatize legitimate student writing. It is this stigmatization of common academic vocabulary, and the implications it has for student assessment, that prompted this study. This article explores the linguistic stigmatization of GenAI in academic writing and highlights potential biases students face from lecturers and markers in ODeL contexts. Hence, this study aims to raise critical awareness about the linguistic stigmatization of GenAI-adopted vocabulary. The overarching research questions (RQs) in this study are:

RQ1: What linguistic patterns, styles, and structural features do markers identify as common in AI-generated student assignments and examination scripts?

RQ2: How do students perceive the use of GenAI tools in their academic writing in terms of authenticity, credibility, and ownership of their work?

LITERATURE

Words, Styles, and Structures Preferred by GenAI

Recent research demonstrates the growth and influence of GenAI on language education, academic writing, and creative expression. dos Santos (2024) conducted a synthesis of 23 studies on GenAI in Brazilian ESL/EFL K-12 classrooms and revealed the increased use of chatbots and AI assistants for vocabulary acquisition and pronunciation. However, dos Santos (2024) calls for critical inquiry into academic honesty, data privacy, and inclusive sampling to address diverse students' needs. Konyrova (2024) in Kazakhstan supports these findings and notes that 70% of ESL classrooms now use GenAI for vocabulary and language practice. In the context of ODeL, Bozkurt and Sharma (2023) emphasize that GenAI has the potential to transform learner support and content creation but cautions that its integration must be guided by pedagogical integrity, value and ethical awareness. Lee et al. (2025) further highlights GenAI's strengths in personalized feedback but also raise concerns around data ethics and fairness. In addition, Fathi et al. (2024) demonstrate that GenAI-driven speech recognition enhances fluency and reduces anxiety in Iranian EFL contexts. In contrast, moving beyond the domain of language education, Liu et al. (2024) conducted a study in China and explored the cognitive effects of GenAI in industrial design education. Their findings revealed reflective benefits but no improvement in originality. This reveals a potential levelling effect of GenAI that may extend to language disciplines as well.

However, findings by Wadinambiarachchi et al. (2024) in Australia and Fu et al. (2024) in USA, argue that while GenAI can support creative thinking, it may also stifle originality, an underexamined issue in writing. Medina (2024) examined ChatGPT's impact on student writing in the USA and shows tone and coherence shifts toward homogenization. Although the study encourages enhanced teacher training, it lacks focus on cognitive and affective impacts in assessment contexts. Other contributions from Mahapatra (2024) in India and Khampusaen (2025) in Thailand report improved ESL writing quality. Hikmah and Walida (2024) and Suh et al. (2025) in Indonesian and South Korean contexts, respectively, find that guided ChatGPT use can improve genre awareness and critical thinking, but only within structured models. Even so, most of this research centers on output or lecturer perspectives, with little empirical attention to how GenAI influences students'

voice, tone, and linguistic identities. This study addresses this gap as it explores how GenAI impacts students lived writing experiences, particularly their abilities to express voice and authenticity within academic assessments that privilege standardized and institutional language norms.

Stigma and Standardization in GenAI-Mediated Writing

Bannister (2024) in the United Kingdom identifies weak language assessment literacy (LAL) and concerns over AI-generated homogeneity in student work through the use of a mixed-methods design. Furze et al. (2024) piloted the artificial intelligence (AI) assessment scale framework and showed that scaffolded GenAI use reduced academic misconduct and improved Vietnamese student outcomes. Similarly, Roe et al. (2024) in New Zealand report mixed perceptions of GenAI in assessment which reveals the need for improved lecturer support. On the theoretical front, Smith et al. (2024) argue that large language models (LLMs) reinforce standard language ideology (SLI). Shabalala (2024) examined AI integration in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics modules at University of South Africa, an ODeL university in South Africa, and found that tools that provide personalized feedback can enhance student engagement, though they also introduce concerns around digital equity and access. Eckert (2018) further argues that LLMs encode dominant language biases due to imbalanced data. Fleisig et al. (2024) provide empirical evidence that shows how ChatGPT exhibits greater stereotyping toward non-standard dialects in the USA, which Smith et al. (2024) corroborates. This study builds on these findings as it focuses on how students themselves experience such erasures in voice, tone, and expression in their writing. Although existing research has examined GenAI's impact on assessment practices, academic integrity, and linguistic bias, few studies have explored how students themselves experience shifts in voice, tone, and personal expression in their writing.

Perceptions of Authenticity in AI-Generated Student Writing

Hohenstein et al. (2023) found that Gmail's smart replies improved tone but were seen as less authentic and highlighted the clarity-sincerity paradox. Agarwal et al. (2025) extend this perspective to academic writing which showed that LLM-generated text nudges students toward Western stylistic norms and raises issues of authenticity. Rettberg (2024) in Norway critiques GenAI for homogenizing narratives and eroding cultural diversity. To address this in education, Sourati et al. (2025) in Canada show that GenAI-assisted academic writing often results in reduced individuality and stylistic richness. Lakshmi (2025) explores digital colonialism through GenAI image generation and shows how non-Western cultures are distorted in GenAI outputs. This aligns with findings by Nyaaba et al. (2024), in Ghana and the UK, respectively, who demonstrate how GenAI marginalizes indigenous pedagogies and student self-expression in education. In the context of ODeL, Bozkurt (2023a) provides a systematic review, which highlights GenAI's potential to personalize learning while warning of bias and transactional distance. Bozkurt (2023b) further explores prompts, emotional intelligence, and GenAI literacy which emphasizes the need for equitable, ethically informed integration in ODeL contexts. The current study addresses a key gap as it examines how GenAI affects students' abilities to express voice, tone, and linguistic identities. These dimensions are often flattened by AI-generated conformity in HEIs.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This article adopts the framing theory as its foundational framework to explore how the use of GenAI in English language learning is constructed and interpreted within academic discourse. Framing theory, first conceptualized by Goffman (1974), explains how individuals use 'schemata of interpretation' to understand social reality. In the context of education, both students and lecturers interpret language use, especially AI-assisted writing, based on culture and institutional enhanced frames. Scholars such as Entman (1993) expanded the theory and defined framing as the process of emphasizing certain aspects of an issue while downplaying others, which directly influences public or institutional perception. In English language learning, for instance, phrases commonly used by GenAI tools, such as 'navigate,' 'delve,' 'landscape,' and 'foster', are increasingly framed not as signs of linguistic development but as indicators of dishonesty or inauthenticity. This reflects a broader politics of language, where what counts as 'legitimate' student voice is contested. Chong and Druckman (2007) emphasize how framing influences opinion and highlights specific values and relevant evidence, especially when lecturers present GenAI use as unethical rather than supportive. de Vreese (2005), de Vreese and Lecheler (2015) further distinguish between episodic and thematic frames, which can

be seen in how GenAI writing is either judged through isolated instances of misuse or understood as part of transformative educational practices. Borah (2011) notes ongoing conceptual challenges in framing research, particularly definitional inconsistencies, issues that resonate with the current debate over what constitutes appropriate GenAI use in language learning. This study critically examines how academic language and literacy students are positioned within these dominant frames and how their academic legitimacy may be affected by the politicization of GenAI in education.

Framing theory provides a detailed understanding of how GenAI content is socially constructed and interpreted within academic contexts in English language learning. The theory helps explain how perceptions of student writing are influenced by dominant frames that define AI-assisted writing as unethical rather than supportive. This is significant for non-native English speakers, who may benefit from GenAI tools to improve fluency and access academic discourse. Yet, instead of focusing on argument strength or coherence, many stakeholders now scrutinize stylistic patterns, reinforce biases, and potentially marginalize students who rely on linguistic scaffolding.

The framing theory identifies four key elements (problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and treatment recommendation) that influence how issues are presented and interpreted (Entman, 1993). Problem definition involves identification of what the issue is and why it matters, which influences how individuals perceive its significance. In addition, causal interpretation explains why the problem exists and often attributes responsibility to specific individuals or conditions. This element influences how people understand the origins of an issue and who or what is to blame. Moreover, moral evaluation assigns ethical meaning to the issue and judges whether actions or outcomes are right or wrong, fair or unfair, which helps mobilize public opinion or action (Drake & Donohue, 1996). Finally, treatment recommendations suggest solutions or courses of action aimed at addressing the problem. These elements work together to structure communication and guide individuals' responses. This makes framing a powerful tool for influencing perception in educational, political and media contexts (Chong & Druckman, 2007; Kuan et al., 2021). The framing theory is considered valuable in various contexts; however, it is not without limitations. Its key limitation is its lack of conceptual and methodological coherence, which limits cumulative theoretical development. Scholars such as Güran and Özarslan (2022) note that framing theory suffers from conceptual fragmentation, with multiple and often conflicting definitions of what constitutes a 'frame.'

Although the framing theory is often critiqued for conceptual fragmentation and lack of methodological consistency (Güran & Özarslan, 2022), this study applies Entman's (1993) four-component model, problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and treatment recommendation, as a structured and coherent approach to analyze plagiarism in academic writing. This ensures theoretical clarity and methodological rigor which allows for a systematic exploration of how stakeholders define, interpret, judge, and respond to plagiarism in the academic writing module (AWM101).

Consequently, the framing theory provides these perspectives into how GenAi is used in English language learning is socially constructed and institutionally interpreted. However, it is limited in both scope and methodological precision. As noted by Güran and Özarslan (2022), framing research suffers from conceptual fragmentation, definitional inconsistencies, and lack of methodological coherence, which hampers cumulative theoretical development. This poses a challenge when analyzing complex, layered discourses such as GenAI-assisted writing, where both micro-level linguistic features and macro-level ideological struggles shape interpretation. This study draws on Fairclough's (1992) three-dimensional framework in critical discourse analysis (CDA) to address these gaps, which expands beyond the representational emphasis of framing theory. In the context of this study, CDA helps examine how GenAI-assisted English writing is framed, judged, and regulated within academic discourse, revealing how power and institutional norms shape perceptions of student voice and authenticity (Wodak, 2022, 2014). CDA views discourse along three interrelated dimensions: first, discourse-as-text, which examines the linguistic features of texts such as vocabulary, grammar, cohesion, and structure. This is relevant in the case of GenAI where recurrent lexical items are framed as markers of inauthenticity rather than linguistic development. Second, discourse-as-discursive-practice, which highlights how texts are produced, circulated, and consumed, paying attention to intertextuality and discursive conventions. This captures how GenAI outputs are not only judged in isolation but also embedded in broader pedagogical and institutional practices. Finally, discourse-as-social-practice, which situates texts within ideological and hegemonic struggles, showing how discourses of academic integrity, authenticity, and ethics

shape power relations and marginalize non-native English speakers who rely on linguistic scaffolding. Through these dimensions, CDA offers a more comprehensive analytic lens that links textual features to discursive practices and social power, thereby addressing framing theory's lack of methodological depth. However, CDA itself often privileges ideology and structure over the sequential organization of talk-in-interaction, a gap that can be bridged by conversation analysis (CA). CA, pioneered by Sacks et al. (1974), provides a fine-grained methodological toolkit for examining the interactional organization of discourse. It focuses on the sequential unfolding of talk, turn-taking mechanisms, repair structures, and the management of intersubjectivity (Heritage, 1985; Sidnell, 2010). In the context of GenAI and academic writing, CA allows researchers to trace how students and lecturers negotiate meaning, assign responsibility, and co-construct categories such as "authentic" versus "inauthentic" language use in real-time interactions. This micro-analytic attention complements CDA's macro-analytic concerns, enabling a multi-layered exploration of how institutional frames are enacted, contested, and resisted in practice. Thus, by integrating framing theory, CDA, and CA, this study establishes a robust analytical framework. Framing theory explains how GenAI writing is discursively positioned through problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and treatment recommendations (Entman, 1993). CDA situates these frames within broader ideological and hegemonic processes, linking textual features to power structures (Fairclough, 1992). CA contributes by examining how such frames and discourses are reproduced or challenged in everyday academic interaction (Heritage, 1985; Sacks et al., 1974; Sidnell, 2010). Together, these approaches allow for a more comprehensive and systematic understanding of how GenAI is framed, practiced, and negotiated in English language learning.

METHODS

Research Context

At University MS (pseudonym), one of South Africa's largest comprehensive institutions for open, distance, and e-learning (CODeL), AWM101 (pseudonym) is a first-year qualification at national qualifications framework (NQF) Level 5. The module is situated in the department of English studies and is designed to equip students with foundational academic writing and critical reading skills. Although it is taught at a first-language English level, the majority of students are EAL speakers. This creates a diverse learning environment. AWM101 is taught entirely online and caters to approximately 19,000 students per semester. The student cohort is highly diverse, from 17 to 60 years, with many balancing part-time employment and studies. A significant number also face socio-economic challenges, including limited access to reliable internet and digital devices, which impacts their engagement with online learning. The teaching team consists of approximately 6 to 8 lecturers per semester, supported by one administrative staff member. Assessments are marked by around 35 external markers, all of whom hold a master's or doctoral qualification. Given this scale and diversity, AWM101 provides a rich context for examining the use of GenAI in academic writing. This module is particularly relevant to the present study, as it has become a site where the use of GenAI tools is both prevalent and readily identifiable in student assignments and examination scripts. Despite the absence of an official institutional policy on GenAI, lecturers in AWM101 regularly caution students against its unethical use. However, many assignments and examination scripts continue to reflect signs of undisclosed GenAI content. Incidents of unethical GenAI use appear to be especially high within this module which make it an important case for exploring the implications of GenAI on academic integrity and assessment practices in a CODeL institution.

Research Method

This study adopts a mixed methods research approach, which integrates both qualitative and quantitative data to provide a comprehensive understanding of participants lived experiences, perceptions, and interpretations of GenAI use in academic writing. The focus is on how GenAI influences linguistic expression, assessment practices, and perceptions of authenticity within a linguistically diverse distance educational context. Mixed methods are particularly significant when seeking to explore not only *what* is happening but also *why* it is happening, which complements the strengths of both numerical data and in-depth narrative perspectives (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). This approach enables the study to capture both broad trends

and critical perspectives, which is relevant when sociolinguistic and technological intersections in education are explored.

Research Paradigm and Design

This research is grounded in a critical interpretive paradigm, which acknowledges the socio-political dimensions of knowledge production and seeks to challenge dominant ideologies embedded in GenAI language (Carspecken, 1996). This paradigm aligns with the study's aim to investigate how GenAI may perpetuate linguistic hierarchies and marginalize non-dominant linguistic identities. Critical paradigms prioritize reflexivity, power relations, and social justice, which makes them especially relevant when we examine technologies that reinforce standardized norms (Lather, 2006).

A case study design was employed to provide an in-depth exploration of the AWM101 module as a bounded system, which allows for detailed insights into the role and impact of GenAI within a specific educational context (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2014). Case studies are ideal for the exploration of phenomena such as GenAI within contexts, which is similar to the current study. It provides flexibility in data collection and analysis methods.

Data Collection Tools

Data were collected using two primary instruments: an online questionnaire for students and an open-ended evaluation form for markers. These tools were designed to gather both qualitative and quantitative data on students' use of GenAI, their writing experiences, and markers observations on linguistic patterns, stylistic changes, and perceived stigmatization in student submissions.

Sampling and Population

The target population included approximately 19,000 students enrolled in the AWM101 module during the first semester of 2025. We drew in additional participants from a pool of about 35 external markers who assess student assignments. This population was selected due to its relevance in understanding both student experiences and markers perspectives regarding GenAI use in academic writing.

A purposive sampling strategy was used to select participants who could provide meaningful understandings into the phenomenon under study. This approach aligns with the critical nature of the research, which seeks to highlight voices that reflect the multifaceted nature of linguistic diversity, access, and representation in AI-mediated education (Patton, 2015). Approximately 309 students responded to the online questionnaire, and about 20 markers completed open-ended evaluation forms.

Research Procedures

A mixed-methods approach was used to analyze the data. Quantitative data from student responses were summarized using descriptive statistics, while qualitative data from both students and markers were thematically analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework. Themes and sub-themes were derived inductively, which focused on two central research foci. These research foci served as thematic anchors for the interpretation of the findings and presenting the data meaningfully.

Validity and Reliability Measures

This study employed several strategies to ensure validity and reliability. Credibility was established through triangulation across data sources, student questionnaires and marker evaluation forms, which allowed for cross-verification of themes and patterns identified from both participant perspectives. The framing theory (Goffman, 1974) was used as an interpretive lens to strengthen the theoretical coherence of the analysis. Member checking was applied by sharing preliminary findings with a subset of participants to confirm whether their experiences had been accurately represented.

Transferability was addressed as we provided thick, descriptive accounts of the research context, participant characteristics, and emergent themes. This enabled us to judge the extent to which findings may be applicable to other contexts within ODeL contexts. Dependability was ensured through the use of a systematic thematic analysis process based on Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework. We made use of detailed documentation of coding decisions and theme development was maintained. Confirmability was

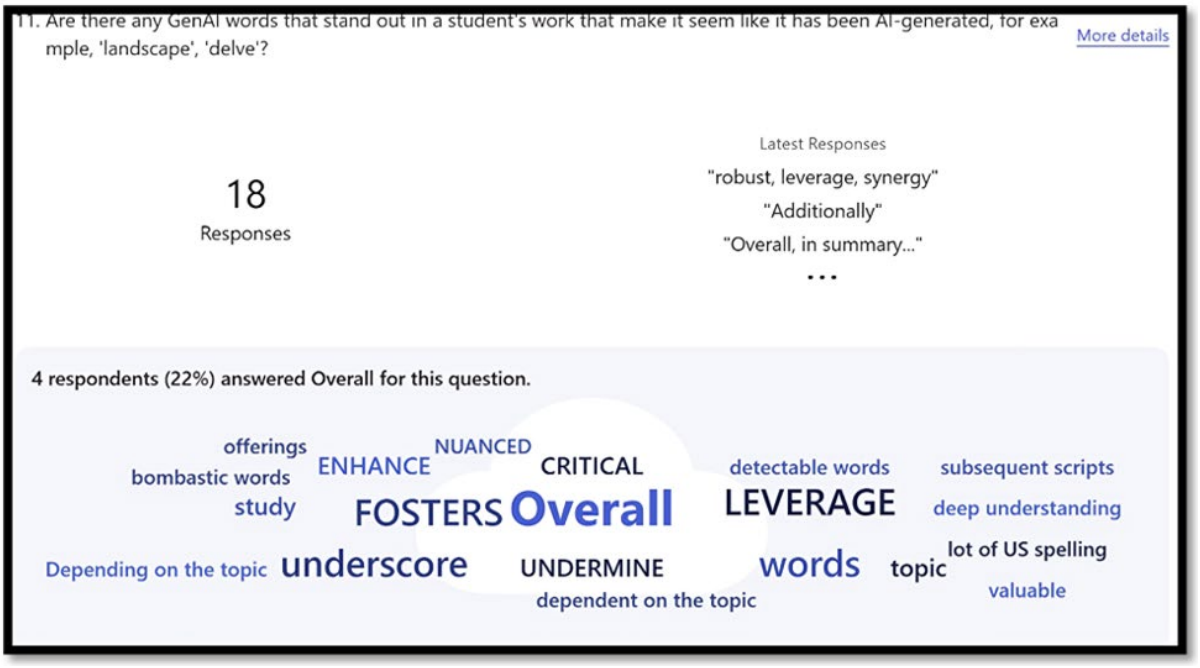

Figure 1. Common linguistic patterns identified by markers (Source: 2025 markers' open-ended evaluation form)

maintained through reflexivity and audit trials. Researchers documented their positions, assumptions, and influences throughout the analytical process to ensure that interpretations remained grounded in the data rather than influenced by preconceived notions. Instrumental validity was strengthened through pilot testing with a small group of students and markers prior to full-scale administration to assess clarity, relevance, and comprehensiveness. Finally, ethical validity was upheld as we adhered to strict ethical protocols, which included informed consent, voluntary participation, and anonymity, as approved by the university's research ethics committee. We ensured ethical treatment of participants enhanced the legitimacy and acceptability of the research process and outcomes.

FINDINGS

The findings presented in this section address RQ1 and RQ2 of the study. The following themes emerged from the open-ended evaluation form completed by markers and questionnaire distributed to students:

- Linguistic patterns commonly identified in GenAI texts and
- Students' perceptions toward the use of GenAI in academic writing.

Linguistic Patterns Commonly Identified in Genai Texts

Most of the markers agreed that students who used GenAI to generate academic writing text exhibited homogenous linguistic patterns. This consensus highlights concerns the linguistic uniformity and stylistic predictability associated with AI-generated content in academic contexts. Such patterns may signal a reduction in rhetorical diversity, lexical range, and authorial voice; elements that are significant to the development of critical and original academic discourse. **Figure 1** illustrates markers' responses to the open-ended evaluation form, which addresses the first RQ.

Figure 1 illustrates the linguistic patterns identified by markers. The most frequently occurring words identified at random include 'overall,' 'underscore,' 'undermine,' 'valuable,' 'foster,' 'highlight,' 'critical,' 'enhance,' 'leverage,' 'nuanced,' 'robust,' 'in summary,' 'leverage,' 'additionally,' 'offering,' and 'enhance,' amongst other words. The excessive use of these linguistic patterns may predispose markers to stigmatize authentic student voices as it reinforces conformity over originality.

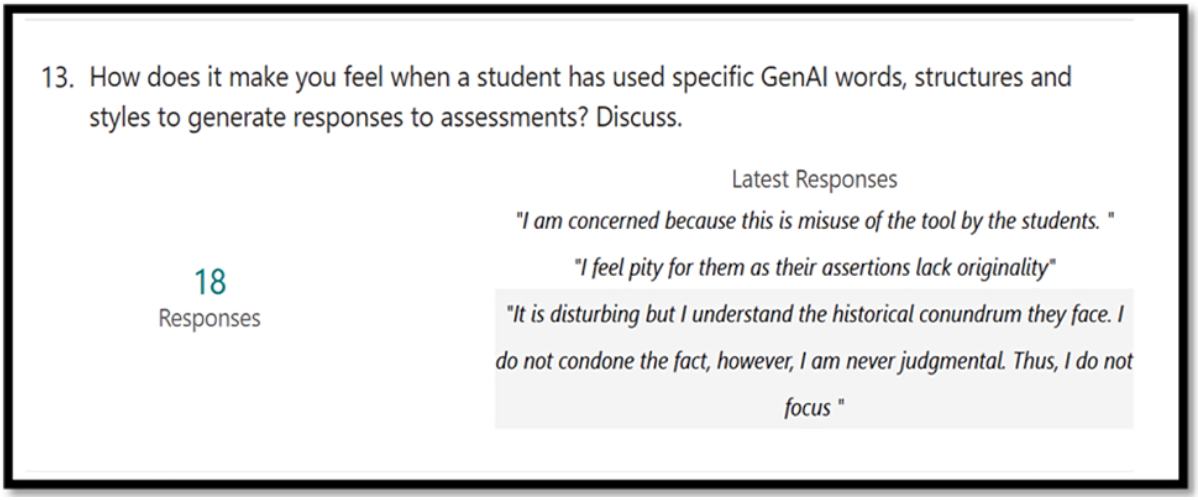

Figure 2. Markers' reactions to GenAI usage (Source: 2025 markers' open-ended evaluation form)

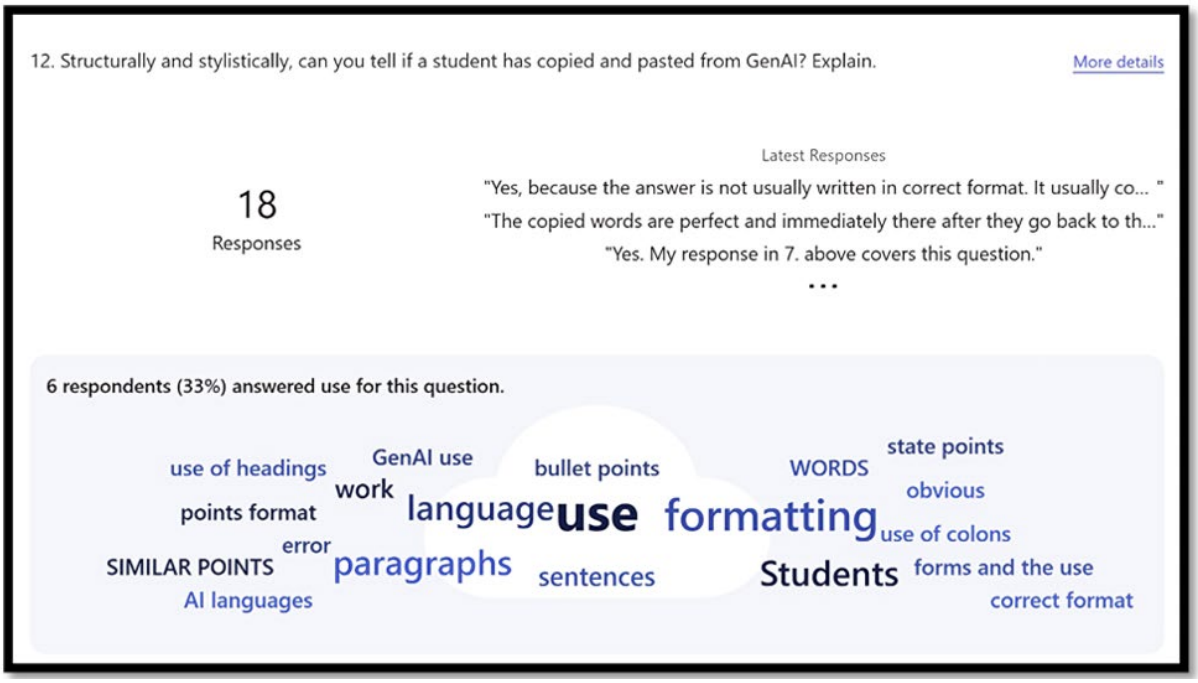

Figure 3. Structured and stylistic features observed (Source: 2025 markers' open-ended evaluation form)

Figure 2 captures markers' emotional responses to GenAI words, structure, and style in students' assessments. The expressed feelings included sadness, disappointment, anger, disillusionment, pity, and concern for academic integrity and authentic engagement.

Figure 2 presents markers' emotions regarding students' use of GenAI in assessments, which include revulsion at the erosion of independent thinking. A major concern is the ethical dilemma when AI-generated work receives similar marks to original submissions, which challenges fairness and assessment of integrity. Suspicion also arises from mismatches between students' language skills and the quality of their work. Lastly, markers worry that graduates may lack critical thinking and discipline-specific competence, which may undermine the value and credibility of academic qualifications.

Figure 3 illustrates markers' varied opinions on the use of similar structure and style in students' work, specifically whether content was copied and pasted from GenAI. Most markers expressed a strong belief and suspicion that GenAI had been used.

Figure 3 highlights structural and stylistic features identified by markers in students' use of GenAI. These include polished responses, frequent headings, mid-sentence colons, and bullet points which replace

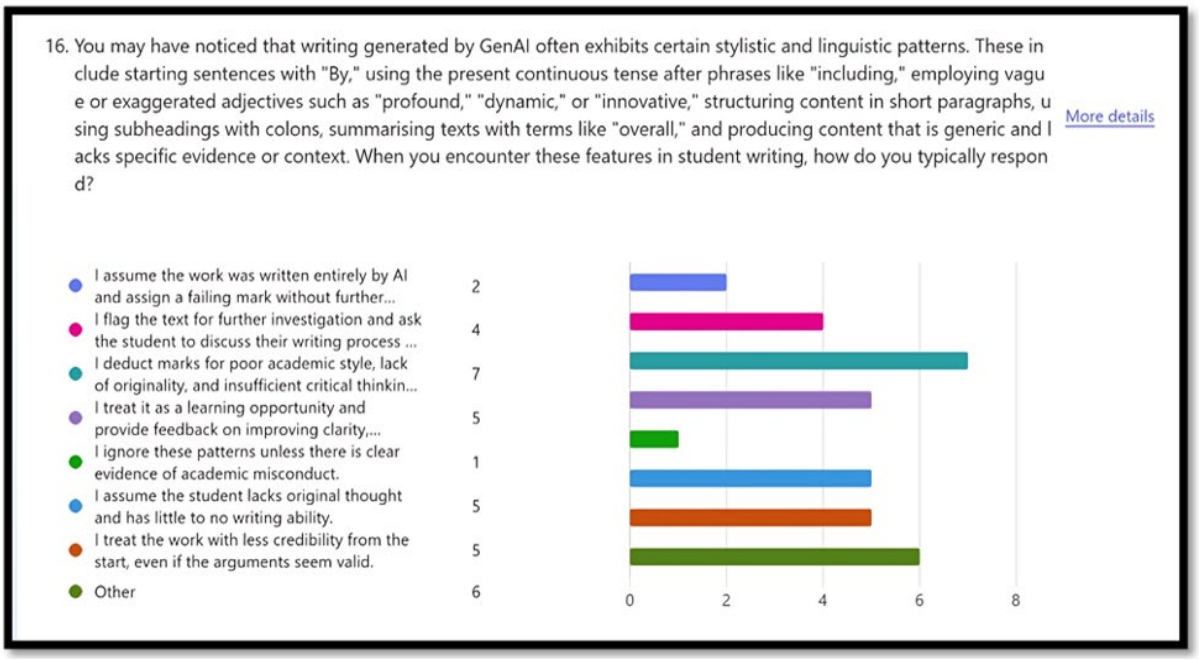

Figure 4. Markers' approaches to assessment when confronted with GenAI usage (Source: 2025 markers' open-ended evaluation form)

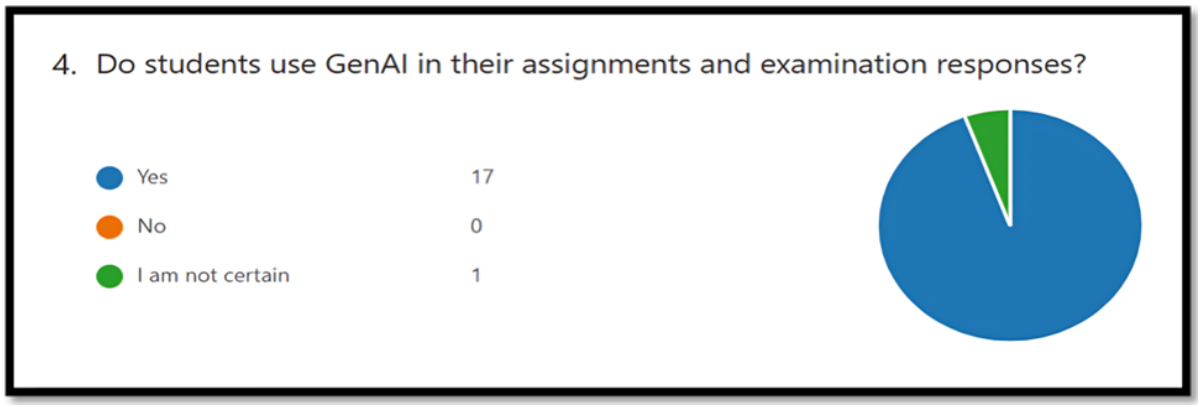

Figure 5. Markers' perceptions of students' GenAI usage (Source: 2025 markers' open-ended evaluation form)

required paragraph formats. Common issues included short, underdeveloped paragraphs, superficial content, unusual formatting, lack of personal voice, overuse of certain vocabulary and punctuation (e.g., semicolons), and deviations from instructions. Formulaic openings such as "This..." or "Additionally..." further signaled a lack of authentic, human-like expression. This led markers to the suspicion that GenAI was used.

Figure 4 presents a range of responses from markers when they encounter recurring stylistic and linguistic patterns in students' work. Many reported deducting marks due to poor academic style, limited originality, and a lack of critical engagement and viewed these patterns as indicative of surface-level learning and minimal cognitive investment.

Figure 4 presents various responses from markers when students' written assignments and examination scripts exhibit signs of GenAI usage, particularly in stylistic and linguistic patterns. The majority of markers reported that they begin deducting marks once they suspect the use of GenAI. In contrast, a minority indicated that they overlooked such patterns unless there was clear evidence of academic misconduct.

Figure 5 indicates that most markers believe that many students use GenAI in their assignments and examination scripts.

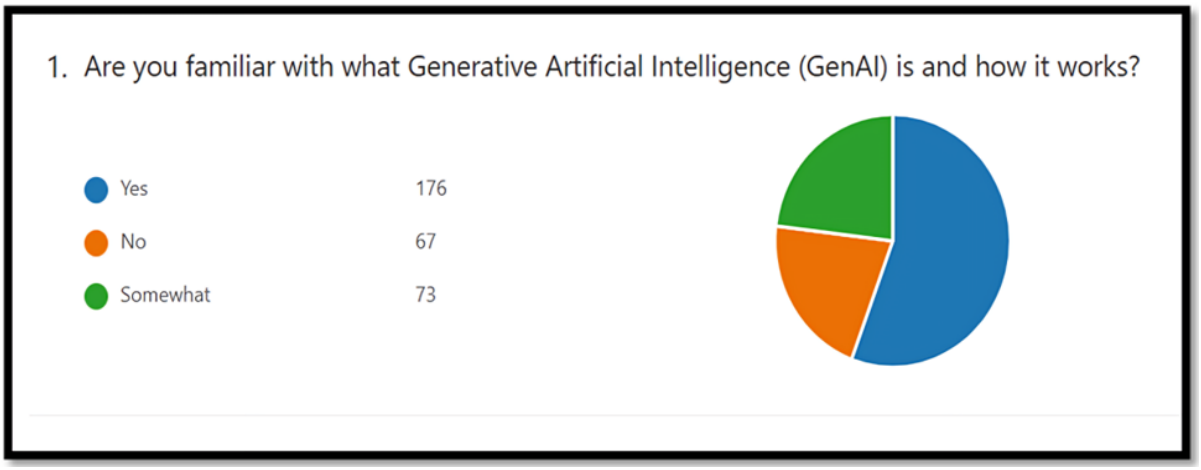

Figure 6. Students' GenAI familiarity (Source: 2025 Students Online Questionnaire)

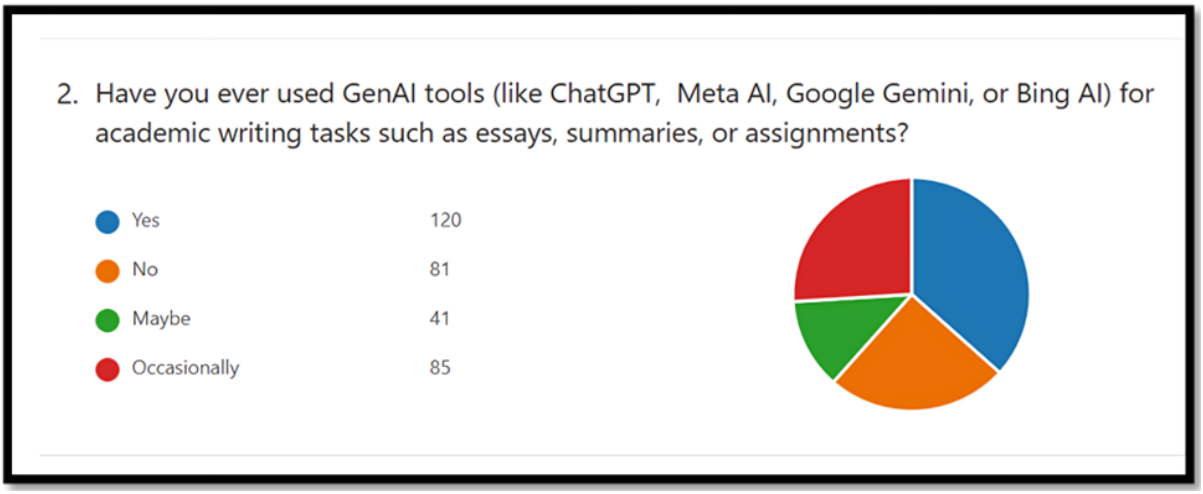

Figure 7. Students' GenAI usage (Source: 2025 Students Online Questionnaire)

Figure 5 illustrates that 94% of markers believe students use GenAI tools in their assignments and examination scripts. This finding suggests that only 6% of students are perceived not to use such tools. The high percentage indicates that the presence of linguistic patterns in students' work influences markers' perceptions and understandings of GenAI usage.

Students' Perceptions Towards the Use of GenAI in Academic Writing

Most students reported being familiar with GenAI and using it to generate ideas. However, the findings suggest that students often feel unfairly judged when their writing resembles AI-generated text. Consequently, many deliberately avoid certain words or structures to reduce the risk of such perceptions. This points to an internalized fear of judgment associated with the academic use of GenAI, even when employed appropriately as a support tool. **Figure 6** presents screenshots of students' responses to the questionnaire, which specifically addresses the second RQ.

Figure 6 illustrates students' levels of familiarity with GenAI and its functionality. A majority of respondents, 176 (56%) reported a clear understanding of GenAI and its functionality, while 73 (23%) indicated partial knowledge. Only 67 (21%) admitted to having no knowledge of GenAI. These findings suggest that most students possess a solid understanding of GenAI and its applications, yet familiarity alone does not guarantee responsible or ethical use, which remains a concern for markers.

Figure 7 indicates that students commonly use GenAI tools such as ChatGPT, Meta AI, Google Gemini, and Bing AI to support academic writing tasks, including essays and assignments.

Figure 7 presents students' use of GenAI tools such as ChatGPT, Meta AI, Google Gemini, and Bing AI for academic writing. A total of 37% of students reported active use; 26% indicated occasional use, and 25%

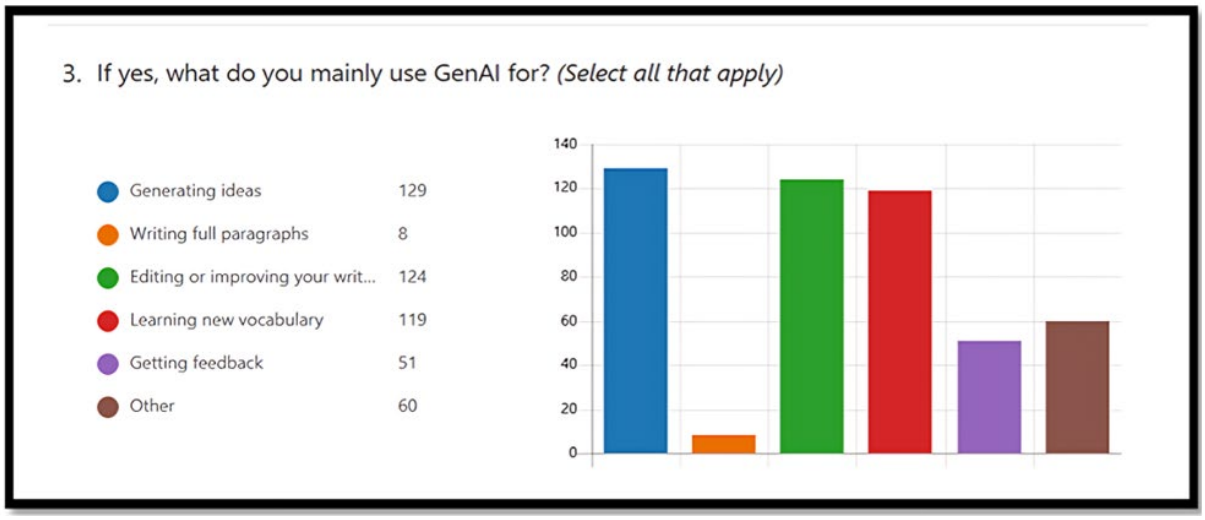

Figure 8. Students' reasons for their use of GenAI (Source: 2025 Students Online Questionnaire)

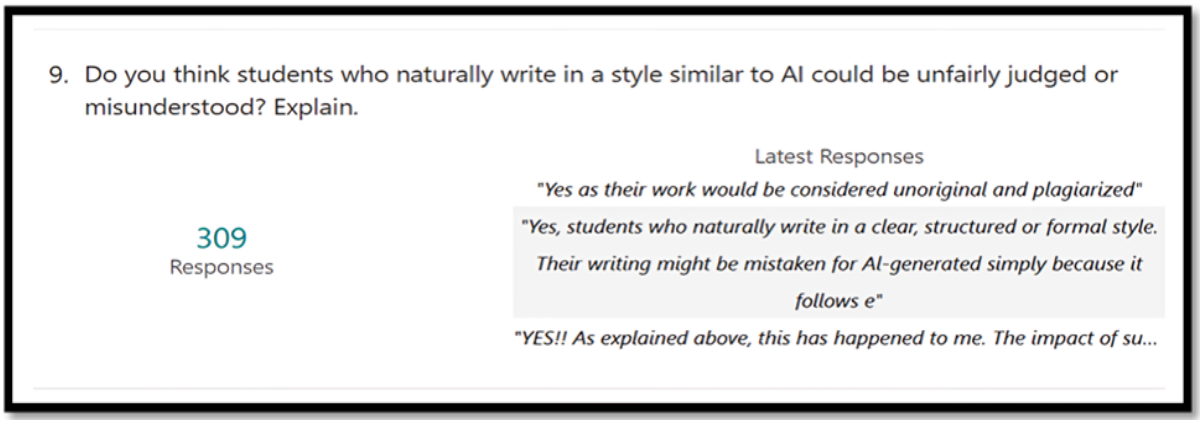

Figure 9. Students mimicking GenAI writing patterns (Source: 2025 Students Online Questionnaire)

reported not using GenAI. In addition, 13% of students were uncertain regarding the use of GenAI. While this reflects significant engagement with GenAI, it also signals variability in students' digital literacy and awareness of ethical boundaries, which lecturers must address.

Figure 8 illustrates that most students use GenAI to generate ideas for their assignments and examination responses.

Figure 8 highlights the various purposes for which students use GenAI. The majority, 26% of students, reported using it to generate ideas, followed by 25% who use it for editing and improving academic writing, and 24% use it to learn new vocabulary. Only 2% reported using GenAI to write full paragraphs, while 10% used it to obtain feedback, and 12% indicated other unspecified uses. These findings suggest that many students may rely on GenAI for support rather than substitution. At the same time, concerns about originality raise questions regarding authorship if not transparently integrated.

Figure 9 illustrates students' perceptions of being unfairly judged and misunderstood when their writing resembles the style typically associated with GenAI text.

Figure 9 reveals that students feel unfairly judged when their writing resembles the style typically associated with GenAI. Many believe they are penalized for having a naturally clear, structured, or formal writing style, which is often mistaken for AI-generated text. One student noted: "Yes, students who naturally write in a clear, structured or formal style are unfairly judged. Their writing is mistaken for AI-generated simply because it follows the stylistic structure." While these perceptions are valid and highlight emotional stress, markers' vigilance can also be understood as part of an institutional effort to prevent potential misuse and uphold standards of academic integrity.

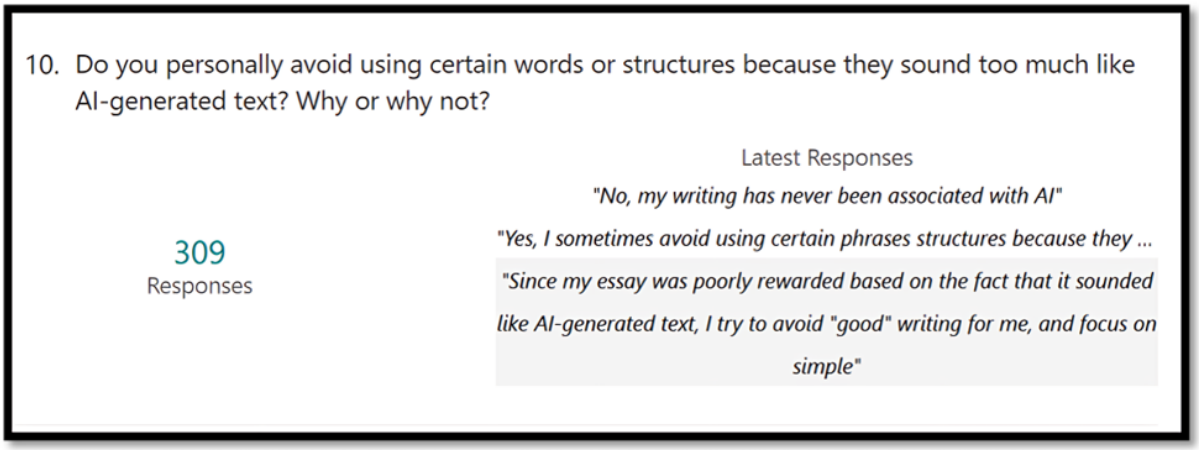

Figure 10. Students' GenAI linguistic patterns avoidance (Source: 2025 Students Online Questionnaire)

Figure 10 illustrates that students consciously avoid using certain words or structures in their writing, and fear that these may mimic AI-generated text.

Figure 10 highlights that many students deliberately avoid using certain words or structures in their writing due to fears that their work may be mistaken for AI-generated text. This avoidance stems from a fear of stigmatization and emotional distress linked to prior negative experiences. As one student noted, "Since my essay was poorly rewarded based on the fact that it sounded like AI-generated text, I try to avoid 'good' writing for me and focus on simple." While this demonstrates students' sensitivity to assessment norms, it also reflects a potential overcorrection that limits academic expression. Nevertheless, some degree of cautiousness is understandable given the current emphasis on AI detection and integrity policies.

DISCUSSION

With regards to the first RQ, '*What linguistic patterns, styles, and structural features do markers identify as common in GenAI student assignments and examination scripts?*' the findings reveal that certain lexical items; such as, 'navigate,' 'dynamic,' 'delve,' 'landscape,' 'foster,' 'harness,' 'underscore,' 'nuanced,' 'valuable,' 'evolving,' 'robust', 'overall,' 'tapestry,' 'interplay,' 'leverage,' 'crucial,' 'pivotal,' 'intricate,' 'mitigate,' 'enrich,' 'deep understanding,' 'additionally,' 'synergy,' 'shed light on,' and starting a sentence with 'by,' 'while,' and 'to,' among other words, are not merely stylistic or semantic curiosities, but have become discursively constructed as markers of inauthenticity and intellectual dishonesty (see **Figure 1** and **Figure 3**). From a CDA perspective (Fairclough, 1992; Wodak, 2022, 2014), these linguistic choices can be analyzed as part of discourse-as-text, where the vocabulary, grammar, and cohesion of student writing reveal underlying ideological and power relations that govern what is considered 'legitimate' academic expression. In addition, markers also noted distinct stylistic tendencies associated with GenAI texts. One such observation was the preference of GenAI tools for American spelling conventions over British English equivalents, illustrated by the use of terms such as 'recognize' rather than 'recognize.' Markers also reported that students who were assisted by GenAI often exhibited a tendency to utilize the present continuous tense in formal academic writing, as exemplified by phrases such as 'recognizing the plight of the people,' which deviates from conventional academic style typically characterized by the use of simple past or present perfect tenses. Furthermore, the analysis revealed that essays suspected of being AI-generated were frequently composed of shorter-than-usual paragraphs, each often introduced by a subheading, a structural feature not commonly employed in standard academic writing unless explicitly required by the task. The frequent use of colons (:) to introduce ideas or explanations was also flagged as a distinguishing feature; several markers indicated that students sometimes retained this stylistic choice verbatim from AI-generated content, which makes the text appear formulaic and structurally distinctive. Through CDA's discourse-as-discursive-practice lens, these patterns are not only textual but socially situated. Markers' evaluations of such structures reflect how academic institutions circulate and reproduce norms that police language, enforce compliance, and demarcate boundaries between acceptable and unacceptable writing (Fairclough, 1992). This finding corroborates earlier work by Lee et al. (2025) and

Sahu (2024), who note the entrenched presence of such vocabulary in academic discourse long before the emergence of GenAI. However, what this study uniquely reveals is the extent to which these once-neutral academic terms and styles are now subject to moral scrutiny and epistemological suspicion and effectively transform them into symbols of technological transgression. The framing theory provides a useful lens to interpret how these linguistic elements are re-coded within academic contexts, as indicators not of linguistic competence or genre awareness, but of unethical reliance on GenAI. Yet, CDA further complements this analysis by situating these judgments within broader social practices and hegemonic processes (discourse-as-social-practice), showing how institutional power shapes the moral evaluation of language, enforces compliance, and marginalizes students who employ GenAI as a learning tool (Fairclough, 1992; Wodak, 2022). Nevertheless, as Güran and Özarslan (2022) warn, the framing theory suffers from conceptual fragmentation and methodological imprecision, which limits its explanatory power when applied to specific sociolinguistic phenomena like those observed here. Nevertheless, the study's findings suggest that markers do not simply evaluate content or argumentation, but they are actively engaged in ideological policing of language use, which arguably often conflates linguistic sophistication with technological illegitimacy. This aligns with Eckert's (2018) critique of SLI, which posits that dominant linguistic norms are institutionally reinforced at the expense of diverse linguistic identities. CDA allows us to interpret these practices as part of a discursive struggle where certain registers, lexical choices, and stylistic features are invested with power, which reflects broader hierarchies and social inequalities embedded in academic discourse. Significantly, however, this study demonstrates how SLI is being reconstituted in the digital age, not only through spoken and written English norms, but through algorithmically shaped expectations of what constitutes 'natural' or 'human' writing. The irony lies in the fact that many of these so-called AI-identified linguistic patterns were previously encouraged in Academic Writing modules, especially for non-native speakers who aim to emulate formal academic style (Noroozi et al., 2024; Sahu, 2024). CDA highlights how the same linguistic tools are interpreted differently depending on context and shows the socially constitutive and context-dependent nature of discourse. Thus, the current linguistic backlash against these structures may reflect not a genuine concern for originality, but an institutionalized resistance to change in academic literacy paradigms.

The second RQ '*how do students perceive the use of GenAI tools in their academic writing in terms of authenticity, credibility, and ownership of their work?*' further conscientizes our understanding of the socio-political dimensions of AI-mediated writing through foregrounding students' lived experiences and perceptions. Although markers identified several stylistic and structural features commonly associated with GenAI texts, most students, however, often resisted this framing, and argued that such linguistic choices are legitimate and widely accessible. One student argued, "I don't know such, because all words are found in the dictionary - meaning anyone can use them". CDA interprets this resistance as a reflection of discourse-as-social-practice, where students negotiate, contest, and sometimes subvert institutional norms that illustrate the ideological struggle over what constitutes an authentic academic voice (Fairclough, 1992; Wodak, 2014). This dissonance between markers' suspicion of GenAI associated linguistic features and students' resistance to their stigmatization reflects the broader ideological struggle over what constitutes an authentic academic voice. Students invoke the universality of lexical access, as seen in their claim that "all words are found in the dictionary," to challenge the institutional framing of certain terms as inherently AI-like. This conflict is emphasized by the framing theory (Entman, 1993; Güran and Özarslan, 2022) and resonates with critiques of SLI (Eckert, 2018), which reveal how dominant linguistic norms are socially constructed and ideologically enforced. Another novel finding is that while many students reported using GenAI primarily for ideation, vocabulary acquisition, and editing support (**Figure 8**), they simultaneously expressed anxiety over being mislabeled as AI-dependent due to stylistic resemblance (**Figure 10**). This self-censorship, wherein students consciously avoid high-register vocabulary or complex syntactic structures out of fear of being penalized, is a previously underexplored consequence of the current climate of linguistic surveillance. Through CDA, these practices can be seen as examples of how discourse regulates behavior, constructs social identities, and reproduces institutional power. This makes explicit the opaque mechanisms of control embedded in academic evaluation (Fairclough, 1992; Wodak, 2022). While Noroozi et al. (2024) and Chen (2022) have documented the pedagogical benefits of GenAI for English Additional Language (EAL) students, this study adds a critical dimension: that these very benefits may be undermined by institutional anxieties surrounding authenticity and authorship. As one student poignantly articulates: *"Since my essay was poorly rewarded based*

on the fact that it sounded like AI-generated text, I try to avoid 'good' writing for me and focus on simple" (**Figure 10**). CDA frames this paradox as a consequence of hegemonic academic discourses, where institutionalized power structures impose constraints on language use, which may influence students' linguistic choices and identities (Fairclough, 1992; Wodak, 2014). This statement exemplifies the paradox of contemporary academic writing instruction; while students are encouraged to write clearly and formally, they are punished when their style inadvertently mirrors GenAI outputs. The framing theory again proves instructive in interpreting this dissonance, which reveals how students' writing is assessed not on the basis of content quality or argumentative strength, but through a moralistic view that equates stylistic sophistication with AI dependence (Chong & Druckman, 2007). However, unlike previous studies that have focused predominantly on lecturer perspectives or output analysis, this study contributes an empirically grounded account of how students themselves experience erasures of voice, tone, and expression in their writing, a dimension which is largely absent from the extant literature. Moreover, the study illuminates how these issues intersect with broader issues of linguistic justice and digital colonialism. Smith et al. (2024) and Lakshmi (2025) have argued that LLMs encode dominant language biases due to imbalanced data sources, which reinforces Western-centric linguistic hierarchies. This study corroborates those claims as it demonstrates how EAL speakers, who may benefit most from GenAI scaffolding, are disproportionately subjected to suspicion and punitive measures when their writing aligns with AI-generated conventions. In effect, the current regime of AI policing does not protect academic integrity (Giray et al., 2025), it reproduces linguistic gatekeeping under the guise of ethical vigilance.

This study contributes to the growing body of critical scholarship on the emotional and psychological toll of AI suspicion on students, particularly those from linguistically marginalized backgrounds. Students report experiencing distress, self-doubt, and a sense of alienation from academic writing because their legitimate efforts to improve fluency and clarity are misinterpreted as signs of cheating (**Figure 10**). This echoes Hohenstein et al.'s (2023) concept of the 'clarity-sincerity paradox,' where increased coherence and grammatical correctness paradoxically reduce perceived authenticity. CDA demonstrates how these structural practices, both technological and institutional, intersect to produce discourses of surveillance, suspicion, and control, which stresses the socially constitutive power of language evaluation and the reproduction of inequality (Fairclough, 1992; Wodak, 2022). Agarwal et al. (2025) extend this orientation to academic writing and show that LLM-generated text nudges students toward Western stylistic norms and raises concerns about authenticity. What this study adds is empirical evidence of how these shifts affect students' internalized writing practices, which prompts strategic simplification and retreat from stylistic ambition. Such findings resonate with Sourati et al. (2025), who show that AI-assisted academic writing often results in reduced individuality and stylistic richness, which suggests that we are witnessing a homogenization of academic prose under the influence of both AI tools and human markers' biases. In addition to these contributions, the study critically engages with the limitations of current detection technologies such as Sapling and QuillBot, which are increasingly used by institutions despite their low accuracy rates, particularly with texts produced by multilingual writers (Giray et al., 2025; Hendawy, 2024; Furze et al., 2024). These tools not only fail to distinguish between AI-assisted and AI-generated writing but also reinforce linguistic profiling when it flags conventionally correct academic writing as suspicious. Bannister (2024) highlights weak LAL among lecturers and suggests that many markers lack the training necessary to make informed judgments about GenAI use. This points to a pressing need for professional development around AI literacy, language ideology, and assessment ethics. Without such interventions, there is a risk that AI-related assessments will perpetuate systemic inequities rather than uphold standards of fairness and integrity.

CONCLUSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND SUGGESTIONS

This study examined how GenAI reshapes academic writing for EAL students in an ODeL context. While GenAI supports idea generation, vocabulary development, and editing, its use has become entangled with institutional suspicion. Students are often penalized not for weak arguments but for traits markers associated with GenAI. Many now censor themselves by avoiding multifaceted vocabulary and formal tone to escape mislabeling. This exposes inequalities for EAL students who risk punishment of the demonstration of the very proficiency they are encouraged to achieve.

The findings highlight an urgent need for institutions to move from surveillance to pedagogical support in their approach to GenAI. Rather than rely on flawed detection tools that conflate proficiency with misconduct, universities should build GenAI literacy and encourage inclusive assessment practices. At the policy level, academic integrity frameworks must adapt to digital writing realities and safeguard linguistic equity.

Practical recommendations include:

- Integrate AI literacy into foundational modules to equip students with ethical and effective use of GenAI.
- Develop clear institutional guidelines with concrete examples of acceptable and unacceptable GenAI use.
- Train lecturers and markers to assess writing holistically and distinguish genuine intellectual engagement from mechanical reproduction.
- Adopt process-oriented assessments (e.g., drafts, reflections, annotated submissions) to promote transparency and learning.
- Apply detection tools cautiously and combine them with human judgment and contextual awareness of student writing histories.

Although limited to one ODeL module in South Africa, the study stresses a broader challenge in higher education where integrity, equity, and innovation in the GenAI era is balanced. Future research should extend to multiple disciplines and institutions to trace how students practice progress over time. The central issue is not the presence of GenAI tools but how institutions define language, authorship, and academic value in a digital age. If universities continue to police language through outdated frameworks, they risk silencing the very voices education aims to empower. Instead, GenAI provides an opportunity to reimagine equitable and authentic learning in the 21st century.

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