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Assessing multimodal, multilingual and GenAI academic literacy

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Abstract

This article critically reflects on the assessment outcomes of a semester-long academic literacy module designed for first-year Humanities students at the University of Pretoria. It presents both qualitative and quantitative findings from a pedagogical approach that integrated GenAI-mediated visual knowledge construction with conventional academic literacy practices, particularly academic writing. The data derive from the AI-Guided Visual Literacies: Illuminating Disciplines for Conceptual Understanding project, which invited students to incorporate visual elements in articulating their pre-university and emerging disciplinary identities. Findings highlight both the affordances and limitations of this multimodal approach. On the one hand, the integration of visual modalities enabled students to transcend the constraints typically associated with unimodal textual expression. On the other hand, a 15.5% performance decline was observed when students transitioned to more traditional, exclusively written forms of academic discourse, such as the literature review. The findings reveal that while multimodality holds promise for enhancing student engagement and self-representation, conversely, its integration into academic literacy curricula demands a nuanced appreciation of students' varying degrees of readiness for university-level knowledge production. The article concludes by proposing pedagogical strategies that bridge conventional academic genres with multimodal and multilingual forms of meaning-making, including GenAI.

Keywords: Academic literacy, multimodal, multilingual GenAI, assessment

Introduction

Academic literacy refers to a student's capacity to navigate, interpret, and produce academic texts and discourse effectively – a competence grounded in multiliteracies and critical thinking, which together enable students to engage critically with, and

contribute meaningfully to, disciplinary knowledge practices (Arend, Hunma and Kongo, 2024). Within this framework, academic literacy extends beyond technical or mechanistic competencies; it encompasses epistemic and ontological dimensions that enable students to acquire disciplinary knowledge while critically integrating their own lived experiences with the epistemic frameworks of academia (Eybers, 2023). For first-year students, academic literacy is essential as it supports their acculturation into the academic environment by developing foundational competencies such as understanding academic terms, structuring coherent arguments, and engaging with discipline-specific conventions. In this context, acculturation is academic literacy's capacity to support students' navigation of new disciplinary ecologies, while maintaining confidence in their academic capacities (Namakula, 2024). In this light, academic literacy is crucial for students' social and cognitive development, and successful progression through higher education.

In the South African context, acquiring academic literacy - particularly the mastery of disciplinary vocabularies and genre conventions - continues to pose substantial challenges for first-year students. Govender, Selehee, and van der Merwe (2024) argue that connecting disciplinary material to students' real-life experiences, while making academic genres more transparent, is crucial for developing academic literacy assessments. Their research implies that current academic literacy assessments often fail to create these important bridges – reproducing structural inequities by privileging dominant forms of knowledge and silencing students' diverse epistemic backgrounds. As a result, unimodal assessment practices – such as multiple-choice tests – risk not only misrepresenting students' capabilities but also reinforcing exclusionary patterns that undermine the transformative and inclusive aims of higher education in South Africa. For example, in South Africa's university system, Black and older students are disproportionately affected by attrition, with significantly higher dropout compared to white and younger peers (Netanda, 2024). Data from the South African Council on Higher Education (2020) indicate that between 2015 and 2020, diploma programmes experienced an annual dropout rate of 43%, three-year degrees 39%, and four-year degrees 32%. Notably, African students exhibited the highest attrition rates - 41%, in contrast to 33% among White students (Council on Higher Education, 2020). In response to these disparities, this study investigates an innovative multimodal academic literacy assessment framework designed to counter disciplinary alienation by affirming multiliteracies as legitimate and transformative modes of academic knowledge production.

In response to the persistent challenges faced by African and global students in navigating unfamiliar disciplinary discourses, genre conventions, and epistemological orientations, this article presents findings from an innovative academic literacy assessment designed to position academic literacy not merely as a set of technical skills,

but as an epistemic tool for disciplinary integration – one that empowers students to critically read, analytically write, and epistemologically situate themselves within academic knowledge communities. The assessment, "Visual Literacy Narrative", sought to integrate generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) image prompts alongside conventional narrative writing. Additionally, the academic literacy assessment encouraged students to incorporate their primary language through translanguaging. Translanguaging is the strategic use of a speaker's full linguistic repertoire as an integrated resource for meaning-making, learning, and identity expression, rather than as separate, isolated systems. The study yields important insights for higher education policy makers and academic literacy practitioners seeking to integrate generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) image generation, primary language use, and multimodal principles into assessment practices. The approach demonstrated value as a foundational gateway into academic literacy, enabling engagement across diverse learning preferences and promoting epistemological inclusivity. However, several challenges, elaborated below, also emerged. As academic literacy complexity increased, student performance declined, with many struggling to translate visual epistemes into conventional writing – exacerbating inequities when assessment shifted from multimodal to unimodal formats.

Theoretical framework

The analysis is framed by two core concepts: multiliteracies and epistemic inclusion. Multiliteracies reconceptualises academic literacy as the capacity to navigate, interpret, and produce meaning across multiple modes – visual, oral, digital, spatial, and linguistic – rather than privileging standard written English alone. This perspective affirms diverse communicative practices as legitimate forms of knowledge, particularly in culturally and linguistically diverse contexts, such as South Africa (see New London Group, 1996: Kalantzis and Cope, 2009). Multiliteracies theory aligns with the article's framing of epistemic inclusion by recognising the need to accommodate diverse forms of meaning-making in academic literacy assessment. Dewa (2020) suggests that inclusive assessment is the intentional incorporation of students' varied forms of diversity. This includes cultural, engendered, ontological orientations. To establish a strong pedagogical foundation and affirm heterogeneous pedagogy, Dewa (2020) advocates for assessments grounded in epistemic inclusivity. Within this framework, inclusive academic literacy assessments are attentive not only to students' pre-university identities but also to their evolving disciplinary and career trajectories (Charema, 2024).

Multiliteracies theory, evolving with digital technology, demands a reimagining of academic literacy assessment to reflect the epistemic diversity of 21st century learners. This article argues that unimodal literacy assessments – particularly multiple-choice formats – fail to recognise or enable multimodal knowledge generation, thereby

marginalising students whose epistemic strengths lie beyond distinguishing between right and wrong answers. The New London Group's (1996) observation that technological advancements exacerbate educational inequalities suggests that contemporary academic literacy assessments anchored in monomodal, monolingual, text-centric paradigms marginalise students whose literacies thrive in multimodal (see Baseley, 2025), multilingual, or digitally mediated forms. According to McKinsey and Company (2023), Generative Artificial Intelligence could generate $2.6 trillion to $4.4 trillion in value across various sectors. The report highlights key advances in banking, high tech including software development, retail, and life sciences (McKinsey and Company, 2023). Based on sixty-three case studies across industries and countries, the McKinsey (2023) report has significant implications for academic literacy development and assessment in Africa. Assessing skills in digital and Generative Artificial Intelligence is not just an educational advancement but also a crucial approach to securing youth economic participation in the evolving digital economy, which demands new expertise and literacies.

The study applies the African Theory of Academic Literacy (Eybers and Dewa, 2025), which integrates Indigenous Knowledge Systems and languages into disciplinary assessments to ensure cultural relevance for African university students. Some scholars, however, advocate for a generic model that separates academic literacy from disciplinary knowledge, excluding students' identities, epistemologies, and ontologies – and devaluing multimodality. In contrast, the African Theory of Academic Literacy grounded in multiliteracies (Cope and Kalantzis, 2009), recognising visual, oral, digital, and spatial modes as essential to knowledge construction. Rooted in Ubuntu principles (Eybers and Paulet, 2021), this theory fosters communal learning that affirms students' cultural identities, enhancing their sense of belonging in academic communities. This article examines the successes and challenges of integrating Generative AI image prompting into students' multimodal literacy assessment to advance epistemic inclusion.

Methodology

The methodology for this study is grounded in a qualitative research design, focusing on the integration of text-to-image Generative AI (GenAI) tools within the ALL 110 Academic Literacy and Language course at the University of Pretoria's Faculty of Humanities. A qualitative paradigm is selected due to its capacity to extract multimodal meaning (Baseley, 2025). While the broader intervention involved around fifty randomly selected first-year students from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds, this article presents an in-depth analysis of five students' narratives, selected to provide rich, illustrative insights within the constraints of article length. These students were tasked with producing reflective assessments that combined traditional written

narratives with GenAI-generated visual representations, enabling a multiliteracies approach to academic literacy. Students also used translanguaging to interpret narration or GenAI prompts in English. Data collection involved gathering both the written reflections and the corresponding images, which were then subjected to narrative and visual analysis to explore the patterns, themes, and semiotic meanings embedded in students' multimodal work.

Alongside the qualitative analysis, the study integrates quantitative data by assessing students' semester performance in ALL 110. This includes a comparative of marks across four lecture groups. This mixed-methods approach allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the academic literacy assessment's impact, exploring potential correlations between students' engagement with multimodal and multilingual literacy tasks and their academic outcomes. Ethical considerations are central to the design: all personal identifiers were removed from the data. Participants selected their own aliases, and informed consent was obtained. The researchers' dual roles as instructors and investigators were managed through reflexive practices, ensuring awareness of potential biases throughout the analysis. By combining close qualitative examination of selected student narratives with quantitative performance data, this study aims to provide robust evidence on the opportunities and challenges of integrating GenAI, multimodal, and multilingual tools into academic literacy assessment.

Results

Qualitative analysis

Analysis of five student submissions revealed consistent patterns of growth through four interconnected domains, demonstrating how scaffolded multimodal and multilingual academic literacy assessment validates lived experience as legitimate academic knowledge. The domains of analysis are affirming identity and cultural patrimony, familial and intergenerational pedagogies, multimodal and multilingual disciplinary literacies, resilience and aspirational capital, and inclusive and holistic validation – each rooted in the specific sociocultural and linguistic realities of the South African context.

Affirming identity and cultural patrimony

Critically, the academic literacy assessment legitimised non-dominant linguistic and cultural identities in the Faculty of Humanities as core to knowledge development. Students effectively embedded their primary languages within academic English narratives, asserting linguistic sovereignty. Turning 20's Sepedi reflection - "Batswadi baka ba be ba mpadisa puku" (My parents were reading a story book to me) -

transformed a childhood memory into a bilingual pedagogical artifact. Similarly, Jabu described reading within her journey in isiXhosa - “Ndikwi gumbi lokufundela ndifunda enye yeenscwadi zamabali”, (I am in the study room reading a folktale from one of my favourite books), anchoring academic literacy in cultural heritage. Visual components extended these cultural affirmations: GenAI prompts like “young black Khoisan girl dancing cultural dance” and “styling mother’s hair in Ndebele attire” by Thobekile required students to articulate cultural practices as scholarly objects. As Thobekile asserted:

> “Respecting my body, myself, culture and tradition is my priority because they made me the person I am today - a person who knows respect”.

This intentional braiding of language, imagery, and narrative repositioned marginalised South African identities in disciplinary spaces as academic strengths, not deficits.

Family and intergenerational pedagogies

Family emerged as the foundational ecosystem for academic socialisation in ALL 110 students’ narratives. Parental and grandparental roles were consistently framed as pedagogical: Turning 20’s library trips with her father - “Every two weeks, my dad and I would go to the library”, and Thobekile’s hair-styling therapy with her mother - “she would turn to the mirror and her eyes would light up” - demonstrated how kinship nurtures cognitive and affective development. Crucially, these bonds persisted through adversity. Painfully, after the loss of her grandmother, Thobekile recalls their conversations and the educational promises she made to her before her passed:

> “I will build you a big house, a double story and you will not do anything by yourself, someone will take care of you when I am at work. Our fridge will be full of food, we will not need anything, but we will eat anything we want at any time”.

Noticeably, grandparents functioned as cultural transmitters and emotional anchors. Thobekile’s grandmother became her “mother and both grandparents” after familial loss, while Zinhle’s grandmother attended school performances as her “home teacher in everything”. Image prompts like “mother accompanying child to school on rainy day” by Zinhle, and “grandparent clapping as granddaughter dances” by Thobekile - visually codified these relationships, enabling students to theorise familial love as education praxis.

Multimodal disciplinary literacies

The integration of GenAI-generated imagery, multilingual text, and reflective writing cultivated advanced disciplinary literacies. Students curated visual representations of their narratives. For example, the GenAI prompts, “15-year-old visiting library” by Turning 20, or “girl with vitiligo” by Reaobaka, demonstrated conceptual links between text and image. Jabu documented her evolution from folktales to analytical history reading:

> “Reading changed how I think globally. It helped me see beyond and think outside the box”.

Jabu’s GenAI image prompt, “17-year-old focusing on a South African history book” visually mapped this cognitive transition. Similarly, Turning 20’s library visit narrative demonstrated information literacy development, while Zinhle’s speech competition victory, “My tone was perfect; judges were deliberately impressed”, highlighted rhetorical mastery. In these contexts, students’ GenAI image prompting necessitated precise, descriptive language, merging technical and creative writing. As Reaobaka noted regarding her vitiligo advocacy, literacy fostered critical agency:

> “I took initiative, creating a safe way for others to share struggles. I learned that you could rescue others through the same thing”.

Resilience and aspirational capital

Hardship narratives transformed into sites of academic fortitude. Students reframed socioeconomic struggle through scholarly aspiration: Thobekile vowed to her grandmother, “I will build you a big house. Our fridge will be food of food”, while Reaobaka’s rainy first day of school “without a uniform” motivated her academic perseverance. Disability and difference became catalysts for advocacy, as with Reaobaka’s vitiligo initiative. University enrolment symbolised hard-won achievement, with Thobekile celebrating: "There are not many who get to study at university, but I did”. Image prompts like “frustrated girl learning computers” by Reaobaka, and “excited student at University of Pretoria” by Thobekile, visualised this trajectory from struggle to aspiration. Crucially, students articulated education as intergenerational redemption, as Reaobaka concluded: “Resilience and kindness can break any barrier”.

Quantitative analysis

This quantitative analysis examines academic performance patterns across three sequential assignments in the ALL 110 course – the first being the visual Generative AI literacy narrative – juxtaposed against the rich multimodal successes it revealed. While the preceding qualitative analysis highlighted profound identity affirmation and

academic development through multimodal and multilingual academic literacy assessment, this dataset exposes critical tensions in inclusive curricula design. Performance data from students in English, Sepedi, and isiZulu modules show a consistent and alarming decline from Assignment 1 (the Visual Literacy Narrative) to Assignment 3 (a traditional unimodal literature review), revealing how curriculum design undermines inclusive pedagogies by devaluing multimodal, culturally grounded approaches.

The quantitative data reveals a paradoxical decline, which contradicts the multimodal and multilingual narrative successes (see Table 1).

Assignment	**Average Score**
Assignment 1: GenAI, multimodal literacy narrative	76.5%
Assignment 2: Unimodal PowerPoint presentation	72.6%
Assignment 3: Unimodal written text	61%
Assignment three comparison	
Sepedi cohort	78%
IsiZulu cohort	61.8%
English cohort	55.6%

Table 1: ALL 110 assignment averages and Assignment 3 performance comparison

The quantitative data reveals a fundamental disconnect between students demonstrated multimodal capabilities and the curriculum's expectations. Three critical mismatches emerge from this misalignment. First, the scaffolding breakdown highlights how students thrived when engaging with visual and identity-affirming tasks - such as creating GenAI images of their pre-university education, cultural dances, or family storytelling moments - yet struggled when abruptly transitioned to traditional unimodal writing. The researchers acknowledge this dissonance reflects epistemic dislocation in

the assessment's approach. As Thobekile articulated, "Dancing in Ndebele attire made me visible", underscoring how multimodal and multilingual assessments validated her presence and voice. However, the curriculum's abrupt shift – from multimodal, multilingual, GenAI-enhanced visual assessment to a decontextualised, unimodal academic writing task – forced students to abandon the established strengths, leaving them without transitional support needed to bridge personal, culturally rooted expression with formal academic conventions.

Second, the dissonance between assessment and instruction becomes evident when comparing students' narrative achievements with their performance in conventional writing tasks, such as literature reviews. While learners like Jabu displayed sophisticated critical analysis through culturally anchored reflections - annotating history books or debating folktales - the rigid rubric of traditional assignments failed to recognise these competencies. The resulting performance gaps reflect not a lack of skills but a failure of the ALL 110 evaluation frameworks to measure what students truly could do. Reaobaka's words resonate here: "Creating safe spaces for others' stories taught me more than any essay", a powerful indictment of assessments that privilege form over meaning and silence the very literacies they claim to evaluate.

Finally, the curriculum's epistemological exclusion is most stark in Assignment 3 – the unimodal written text – where linguistic and cultural diversity are systemically silenced, especially for students in the English module. Those who had fluidly woven Sepedi and isiZulu into their multimodal narratives – like Turning 20's library reflection, "Ke tlallana ka lethabo", which she interpreted in English as, "I was overwhelmed with happiness at the library" – found their voices erased in monolingual academic tasks. X Zinhle's lament captures it: "My grandmother was my home teacher in everything, except in university writing". Yet the uniform decline across language groups reveals a deeper truth: the curriculum' did not just neglect multiliteracies – it actively privileged a narrow academic register that excluded the very knowledge that students brought. Notably, the Sepedi and IsiZulu cohorts – largely home-language speakers – outperformed the English cohort, primarily composed of additional-language learners, in Assignment 3, exposing not a deficit in ability, but a design flaw in assessment.

Discussion

The study's findings reveal a profound tension at the heart of contemporary academic literacy pedagogy, including assessment: multimodal approaches - particularly those integrating GenAI and translanguaging - powerfully affirm students' identities and cultural epistemologies yet falter when ineffectively integrated with conventional gatekeeping mechanisms, such as unimodal texts. However, this finding is not surprising: the African Theory of Academic Literacy (Eybers and Dewa, 2025) holds that

pre-colonial African epistemologies were inherently multimodal and multilingual – even in regions where writing first emerged among humans, such as ancient Kemet (Regulski, 2016) and Ethiopia (European Research Council, 2015). The 15% average decline from Assignment 1, multimodal visual narratives – to Assignment 3, unimodal literature reviews, does not signal a failure of student capability, but a rupture between pedagogical promise and institutional practice – where academia still privileges monolithic, colonial forms of literacy over the very multimodal, multilingual epistemologies that once birthed writing itself in Kemet and Ethiopia. This decline is not an anomaly – it is the expected outcome of a system that claims to value diversity yet structurally silences it.

The affordance-acculturation paradox

Multimodal academic literacy assessment demonstrated unparalleled capacity for epistemic inclusion, directly addressing South Africa's attrition crisis (Council for Higher Education, 2020) by centring marginalised identities. Students like Thobekile leveraged visual GenAI visual prompts to assert cultural visibility, expressed as: "Dancing in Ndebele attire made me visible", embodying Dewa's (2020) vision of inclusive pedagogy that honours heterogeneity. Similarly, primary language integration into academic literacy assessment, via translanguaging, enacted the African Theory of Academic Literacy's core tenet: Indigenous languages are vehicles for disciplinary acculturation (Eybers and Dewa, 2025). These successes align with multiliteracies theory (New London Group, 1996), proving that diverse semiotic modes - visual, linguistic, spatial - activate critical engagement inaccessible through text alone.

However, students' multimodal strengths intensified the acculturation paradox. As assignments progressed toward traditional monolingual, unimodal norms, students faced what Namakula (2024) terms epistemic displacement: the disorienting shift from knowledge validation to knowledge compliance. Jabu's lament - "Reading became my unwinding tool but now I'm overwhelmed by academic writing" - encapsulates the cognitive dissonance when self-authored epistemologies collide with unimodal, culturally sterile academic writing. The performance decline thus represents not skill deficiency but ontological resistance against the ALL 110-assessment regime - a refusal to divorce knowledge from being.

GenAI as bridge and barrier

Generative AI's role exemplified what Cope and Kalantzis (2009) envision as digital multiliteracies' democratising potential in academic literacy assessment. For first-generation students like Reaobaka, image prompting the "girl with vitiligo" transformed private stigma into public advocacy, leveraging technology to "create safe spaces for

others' stories". This aligns with the McKinsey group's (2023) emphasis on GenAI as critical for economic participation, suggesting that early academic exposure builds vital digital literacies. Crucially, GenAI mediated academic literacy assessment facilitated students' perception of relevance between lived experience and disciplinary content. Zinhle's school dance image, where her grandmother was acknowledged as "home teacher", visually mapped community knowledge onto academic identity.

However, GenAI's limitations also created significant problems. The tool often produced overly simplistic or stereotypical images of cultural identities, despite its potential. Because of algorithmic biases, students found they had to use narrow, cliched descriptions like "young black Khoisan girl dancing" to generate recognisable images of themselves. This ironically worked against the Ubuntu philosophy's focus on nuanced, community-based identities (Eybers and Paulet, 2021). Rather than capturing the rich complexity of students' actual experiences, the Generative AI image-generation tools frequently reduced cultural expressions to shallow stereotypes. This created tension between the tool's promise of self-representation and its tendency to flatten diverse identities into predictable visual tropes. In this context, GenAI fostered critical thinking asymmetries. While students excelled at descriptive writing, many struggled to translate those insights into effective image prompts that accurately represented themselves or their cultural contexts. As Arend et al. (2025) warn, technology without pedagogical bridging risks becoming performative rather than epistemological. The decline from Assignment 1, visual literacy narrative, to Assignment 3, unimodal review, reveals this gap: students could curate personal knowledge multimodally, but were prevented from doing the same, or critiquing it, when reviewing formal academic genres.

Scaffolding dilemmas in multilingual contexts

The study's most significant contribution lies in exposing how even thoughtfully designed multimodal curricula fail when scaffolding ignores linguistic hierarchies. That Sepedi and isiZulu cohorts outperformed English students in Assignment 3, the unimodal task underscores multilingualism's under-recognised and underdeveloped strengths in academic literacy assessment. As Turning 20 demonstrated through her library narrative, "Ke tlalana ka lethabo", or 'I was overwhelmed with happiness at the library", translanguaging fostered metacognitive depth impossible in English alone. These findings powerfully affirm Charema's (2010) argument that linguistic diversity manifests epistemic diversity.

Nonetheless, the curriculum's Anglophone bias undermined these assets. Assignment three's monolingual requirement forced, even among the English cohort, what Namakula (2024) calls epistemic self-erasure: these students' heritage languages were silenced in the same curriculum that previously integrated this vital aspect of their

academic identities. Zinhle's realisation, "My grandmother was my home teacher in everything except university writing" - reveals the constraining effect of this transition. Worse, the identical performance decline pattern across language groups proves that current scaffolding between assessments inadequately prepares all students for academia's tacit linguistic expectations. This failure contradicts multiliteracies theory's core principle: that meaning-making flexibility across modes should enhance, not hinder, academic literacy development.

Temporal and cognitive load inequities

The performance patterns reveal how assessment timing and design can create burdens that disproportionately impact students who emerge from marginalised, or economically constrained communities. While the late-semester unimodal assignment appeared to show multilingual students excelling - Sepedi (78%) and isiZulu (61.8%) cohorts significantly outperforming English peers (55.6%) - this divergence underscores how cognitive load inequities operate. For students navigating primary language marginalisation, the cumulative exhaustion of late-semester assessments strips away the very multilingual and multimodal strengths they leveraged earlier. Reaobaka's narrative - "stayed up late with empty stomach doing homework" exemplifies this: fatigue from surviving inequities directly impairs academic literacy development.

Early multimodal tasks functioned as cognitive ramps, reducing barriers for students without academic privilege. Thobekile's GenAI image of dancing in Ndebele attire required cultural fluency, allowing her to demonstrate historical insight on her own terms. Again, this aligns with Dewa's (2020) observation that inclusive tasks honour heterogeneous learning pedagogy. However, as assessments progressed toward high-stakes, written text-only formats, the mental bandwidth needed to integrate cultural knowledge into monolingual academic writing became unsustainable for many. The apparent 'strength' of Sepedi and isiZulu cohorts in Assignment 3 is not inherent superiority - it is a testament to African students' resilience in enduring a system that coerces them to compartmentalise their identities, a concern raised by Eybers and Dewa (2025).

The data exposes a cruel irony: students who thrive in identity-anchored tasks, such as Assignment 1, are penalised when assessments demand they abandon those anchors. First generation students like Turning 20, who articulated library joy, expended immense cognitive labour to "switch codes" into academic English weeks later. This invisible tax – viewable as a type of translanguaging burden - is rarely accounted for in curriculum design. The temporal compression of late-semester academic literacy assessments thus functions as a silent filter: it rewards those whose home epistemologies align with academic norms and exhausts those translating between

ontological worlds. These contradictions necessitate reframing inclusive assessment. Rather than viewing multimodal and multilingual strengths and unimodal literacy as oppositional, we might reconceptualise academic literacy as epistemic hospitality - a practice where academia receives student knowledge on their terms before guiding its emergence through assessment.

Implications of the findings

These implications reveal that conventional academic literacy assessments misread African students' academic struggles as deficiency, rather than recognising it as their response to epistemological exclusion. In this context, multiple choice academic literacy tests not only exclude students' epistemic and linguistic diversity – but function as gatekeeping mechanisms that erase their family and community ontologies from the construction of disciplinary knowledge. In this context, academic literacy assessments counter institutional transdisciplinary aims (Eybers, 2025). When late-semester tasks measure endurance over competency, they mistake exhaustion for intellectual deficiency – penalising students who must navigate compound marginalisation, while often being constrained by unimodal and monolingual assessments. Sepedi (78%) and isiZulu (61.8%) students' resilience in Assignment 3 does not indicate systemic equity; rather, it reflects extraordinary labour to bridge worlds under duress. Sepedi and isiZulu higher scores represent successful navigation of oppressive structures, not the absence of epistemic and linguistic binaries. Similarly, the cumulative cognitive load - where early multimodal and multilingual successes became buried under exhaustion - exposes the ALL 110 curriculum's failure to recognise that learning occurs along an ontological continuum of being, not isolated performance moments.

Epistemic hospitality (see Kuokkanen, 2008) directly addresses these fractures by reframing the purpose of academic literacy assessment. Expect hospitality requires that academia acknowledges sanctioned epistemic ignorance and receives knowledge in students' authentic forms - like Turning 20's Sepedi expression of library joy or Thobekile's embodiment of history through dance – before initiating translation into conventional academic literacy. This shifts academic literacy assessment of novice African scholars, including the volunteer participants of this study, from measuring assimilation fatigue to honouring the process of knowledge negotiation and epistemic plurality. When a student's library visits and indigenous folk tale annotations are treated as foundational to their literature review, cognitive load transforms from oppressive burdens to scaffolded meaning-making. Epistemic hospitality thus repositions 'resilience' not as individual grit against systems, but as institutional responsibility to metabolise the diverse epistemologies African and global students bring to academic literacy assessment.

Conclusion

This research illuminates the profound potential and critical challenges of integrating multimodal, multilingual, and Generative AI approaches into academic literacy assessment. The core tension lies in the stark contrast between the demonstrable power of these inclusive pedagogies to affirm student identities, leverage cultural patrimony, and foster deep engagement through visual and linguistic diversity, and the systemic failure of conventional academic assessment paradigms, including decontextualised multiple choice tests, that privilege unimodal, monolingual text. The alarming 15% performance decline among ALL 110 students as tasks shifted from multimodal narratives in Assignment 1 to unimodal literature reviews in Assignment 3 is not a reflection of student deficiency, but an indictment of epistemic injustice within academic literacy curriculum design and assessment. It reveals a curriculum-wide disconnect where students' validated strengths in identity-anchored, multimodal meaning-making become liabilities when facing decontextualised academic gatekeeping mechanisms, leading to epistemic displacement and self-erasure. Generative AI, while offering an innovative bridge for self-representation and transforming lived experience into academic literacy assessment, simultaneously acts as a barrier due to inherent algorithmic biases that flatten complex identities into stereotypes and foster critical thinking asymmetries when not pedagogically bridged to analytical writing.

The opportunities are transformative. Multimodal approaches, grounded in multiliteracies theory and the African Theory of Academic Literacy, provide vital cognitive ramps for diverse learners, fostering epistemic inclusion by centring Indigenous Knowledge Systems and African languages in academic literacy assessment. Multimodality validates heterogeneous learning practices; nurtures resilience rooted in intergenerational pedagogies and equips students with essential digital literacies crucial for participation in the evolving Generative AI-driven economy. Translanguaging emerges not as a deficit, but as a powerful epistemic resource, enabling metacognitive depth impossible in English assessment alone, as evidenced by the superior performance of Sepedi and isiZulu cohorts in the final unimodal task - a testament not to inherent superiority but extraordinary resilience under oppressive linguistic constraints.

To harness these opportunities and dismantle the challenges, achieving true epistemic justice demands systemic pedagogical reconceptualisation of academic literacy assessment. It is vital to implement epistemically hospitable scaffolding. Curricula must abandon abrupt transitions. Scaffolding must explicitly bridge multimodal, multilingual foundations to conventional academic genres. This involves sequencing tasks, of varying complexity, where students' initial identity-affirming narratives are not discarded but consciously analysed and integrated into subsequent disciplinary genre production.

Here, reference is made to Turning 20's library joy and Thobekile's dance as epistemic embodiment. Instruction must explicitly teach the integration of critical thinking developed visually and multilingually into textual analysis and argumentation, honouring the continuum of knowledge generation.

This research calls on higher education institutions to thoughtfully reconsider academic literacy assessments that overlook – or inadvertently dismiss – students' cultural, epistemic, and intergenerational identities, as well as their multilingual, multimodal, and digital ways of knowing, as these omissions have real and measurable consequences for learning and belonging. The 15% performance decline when shifting from affirming multimodal tasks to decontextualised, unimodal assessments is not student deficiency, but evidence of epistemic injustice and self-erasure within dominant systems. While inclusive pedagogies - grounded in multiliteracies, translanguaging, and African epistemes - unlock transformative potential, fostering resilience, digital literacies, and identity validation, current academic literacy assessment constructs, including neutral, autonomous concepts – sabotage this. Generative AI acts as both tool and trap, amplifying biases without pedagogical bridging. Therefore, institutions are called to thoughtfully transform oppressive academic literacy assessments into epistemically hospital ones – requiring sustained, intentional scaffolding that connects students' multimodal and multilingual strengths to disciplinary expectations. This requires sustained scaffolding that explicitly bridges multimodal and multilingual foundations to disciplinary genres. Continuing to uphold assessments that enforce epistemic displacement is not only pedagogically misguided, but a failure of our shared academic responsibility.

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