KNOWLEDGE, POWER, AND THE STRUGGLE TO WRITE: SOCIAL BARRIERS IN RESEARCH PROPOSAL DEVELOPMENT AMONG ENGLISH LITERATURE STUDENTS

Karnedi[1], Lelly Zuyana Asril[1*], Estuhono[2]
[1]Universitas Persada Bunda Indonesia, Jalan Diponegoro No 42, Pekanbaru 28116, Indonesia
[2]Universitas Dharmas Indonesia, Lintas Sumatera No.Km 18, Kabupaten Dharmasraya 27581, Indonesia

*Correspondence E-Mail: lelly.zuyana@gmail.com
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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the social and linguistic barriers encountered by English literature students in developing research proposals, focusing on the interplay between knowledge, power, and academic writing. It aims to identify key difficulties faced by students and evaluate the impact of the Linguistics Research Methods (LRM) course in addressing these challenges. Employing a mixed-methods approach, the study involved 32 undergraduate students from Universitas Persada Bunda Indonesia and utilized both questionnaires and tests, including pre- and post-assessments of proposal writing. The evaluation covered five core indicators: organization, logical development of ideas, grammar, punctuation and mechanics, and style and expression. The findings show a notable improvement in students' writing performance after completing the LRM course. The average pre-test score was 54, while the post-test score rose to 72, indicating a significant enhancement in their proposal-writing skills. Nevertheless, students struggled with key aspects such as articulating research focus, distinguishing literature reviews from problem statements, and presenting their ideas in clear, academic language. These challenges point to deeper issues of epistemic access and uneven academic capital. This research contributes novel insight into how academic gatekeeping and unequal access to research literacy intersect within undergraduate education. It recommends a pedagogical emphasis on critical academic writing, reflective inquiry, and inclusive mentorship to support students' entry into scholarly communities. These findings have broader implications for improving higher education practices in the social sciences and humanities, particularly in non-native English contexts.

Keywords: Academic Literacy, Epistemic Access, Linguistic Challenges, Power and Knowledge, Social Barriers

INTRODUCTION

Writing a research proposal is often seen as a critical first step in a student's academic journey. However, for many students in English Literature programs—especially those in non-elite universities with limited resources—this activity is not merely a technical challenge but an epistemic struggle. Their difficulties stem not only from a weak grasp of academic writing conventions but also from limited access to scholarly discourse, institutional expectations that are not always clearly communicated, and socio-cultural pressures that make the writing process feel like a field of negotiation filled with uncertainty (Karnedi, 2025). Djiwandono & Ginting (2025) note that students' pre-test results in the Linguistics Research Method course averaged

only 54, indicating a low ability to organize ideas, construct a logical flow of thought, and use appropriate academic language. This fact points to systemic barriers that go beyond mere writing skills.

Previous studies have addressed the difficulties students face in writing academic work, particularly research proposals. Hyland (2022) and Jusslin & Widlund (2024) emphasize the importance of understanding the social context in academic writing, which cannot be separated from power relations in higher education. In similar contexts, Eubanks & Schaeffer (2020) and Khalaf & Alshammari (2023) reveal how students from marginalized social backgrounds often struggle to access dominant forms of academic literacy. Studies by Gatcho & Ramos (2020) and Hyland (2023) even show that academic writing challenges cannot be simplified as merely skill-based issues but involve dimensions of identity, institutional expectations, and genre awareness. Meanwhile, Attard (2018) and Lee (2022) highlight the significant impact of explicit and continuous academic guidance on improving the quality of students' proposals.

More technical research, such as that by Bui et al. (2023), Cer (2019), and Mali (2023), shows that the structure and style of proposals are often major obstacles for non-native English-speaking students. In the Indonesian context, studies by Danasasmita et al. (2024), Rafsanjani & Rozaq (2024), and Syaidina et al. (2024) found that a weak understanding of research methodology and the inability to identify sharp research problems are the main causes of poor proposal quality. Similar results were found by Setiawan et al. (2025), who underscored the importance of systematic and contextual academic literacy training. Other studies, such as those by Nasrullah et al. (2024) and Werdiningsih et al. (2025), reveal that the gap between lecturers' expectations and students' understanding of the proposal genre leads to communication breakdowns that directly impact writing quality.

Another relevant body of literature is Sundararajan's (2021) findings, which stress the importance of academic socialization strategies in helping students grasp tacit scientific practices. On the other hand, Anson (2024) and Bassett & Macnaught (2025) argue that overly technical institutional approaches to academic literacy fail to accommodate the diverse learning experiences of students. Meanwhile, studies by Mbah & Ezegwu (2024) and Sicka & Butler (2025) show that students from the Global South often undergo a process of "taming" to align with the hegemonic norms of Western academic writing. In the local context, research by Andari & Mujiburohman (2025) and Sudimantara et al. (2025) also indicates that the weak critical capacity in proposal writing is not an individual problem but rather a reflection of structural issues within curricula and pedagogies that remain normative and dialogue-deficient.

From this body of literature, a pattern emerges suggesting that difficulties in writing research proposals are not new in academia. However, most studies still focus primarily on technical or pedagogical aspects and pay insufficient attention to the complex interactions between knowledge inequality, classroom power relations, and students' social experiences in writing. In fact, writing experiences—especially for students from non-language or non-methodological disciplines—are deeply social events entangled in tensions between

expectations, academic authority, and personal limitations.

This is where the present study takes its stance. Rather than focusing solely on writing ability, this research views the writing of research proposals as a subtle form of resistance, in which students struggle to understand and meet academic demands in conditions that often do not favor them. By analyzing changes in pre-test and post-test results along with students' reflective experiences, this study opens the possibility of understanding proposal writing not merely as a skill but as a social practice shaped by power relations, access to academic discourse, and the formation of academic identity.

The aim of this study is to explore the social and cognitive barriers in writing research proposals among English Literature students and to assess the extent to which linguistic methodology training can enhance their capacity to navigate academic life more critically. In doing so, the research offers not only an evaluation of instructional effectiveness but also a conceptual contribution to the understanding of academic literacy as a non-neutral practice, one that is inherently shaped by negotiation. The findings are expected to enrich discourse in higher education within the social sciences and humanities, particularly in the context of developing countries where access to scholarly resources and inclusive supervision remains a persistent issue.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a quantitative approach with a descriptive design, aimed at systematically depicting the levels of difficulty and challenges faced by English Literature students in writing research proposals. This design was chosen as it enables the researcher to objectively measure pre-determined variables and present data in a structured and numerical form. According to Kawar et al. (2024), a quantitative approach is well-suited when the researcher intends to measure how extensively a phenomenon occurs among respondents using instruments that can be validated for reliability. In this context, the descriptive design provides a detailed and measurable picture of students' proposal-writing difficulties before and after taking the Linguistics Research Method (LRM) course.

The study was conducted in the English Literature Study Program of Universitas Persada Bunda Indonesia, a private university that demographically represents students from diverse social and academic backgrounds. This site was purposively selected based on the consideration that students at such institutions often face structural barriers in accessing adequate academic literacy, including in writing scientific work. Hence, it serves as a relevant and representative setting to explore the research problem.

The population of this study included all sixth-semester students enrolled in the Linguistics Research Method course during the even semester of the 2024/2025 academic year. From this population, 32 students were selected as respondents and simultaneously served as the research sample. A total sampling technique was used due to the relatively small and

homogeneous population. These students were selected because they had already received basic theoretical training in research methodology and were in the process of preparing to write their undergraduate theses, placing them at the right stage for assessing their capabilities and challenges in proposal writing.

Data were collected using two main instruments: tests and questionnaires. The test instrument was used to directly assess students' proposal writing skills through pre-test and post-test tasks. Respondents were asked to write a proposal draft before and after completing the LRM course. The written outputs were assessed using a scoring rubric covering five key aspects of academic writing: (1) organization, (2) logical development of ideas, (3) grammar, (4) punctuation and spelling, and (5) style and quality of expression. Each aspect was scored and analyzed using descriptive statistics to determine the mean and any significant changes between pre- and post-tests.

The questionnaire, on the other hand, was used to explore students' subjective perceptions and experiences regarding difficulties in writing proposals. The questionnaire was structured around three main indicators: (1) challenges in writing background and problem formulation, (2) difficulties in literature review writing, and (3) problems in designing methodology. These indicators were broken down into 23 items, each rated on a four-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 4 = strongly agree). The questionnaire scores were then categorized into difficulty levels: low, moderate, high, and very high (Dannels, 2018; Sugiyono, 2020).

Before being used in the main study, both the test and questionnaire instruments underwent validity and reliability testing. Content validity was assessed through expert judgment from English education and research methodology scholars to ensure item alignment with the competencies being measured. For the questionnaire, empirical validity was tested using the Pearson Product Moment correlation coefficient in a pilot study. An item was considered valid if the calculated r-value exceeded the critical r-table value at a 5% significance level. Furthermore, reliability was tested using Cronbach's Alpha, with an alpha value > 0.70 considered reliable (Villamin et al., 2024). This ensured that the questionnaire produced consistent and dependable data. The collected data were analyzed using descriptive statistical techniques. Pre-test and post-test scores were compared to determine improvements in proposal-writing abilities following the course. Meanwhile, questionnaire results were analyzed to identify the most dominant areas of difficulty experienced by respondents. These findings were then used to formulate conclusions and recommendations aimed at improving the effectiveness of academic literacy instruction in higher education settings.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Changes in Students' Academic Abilities Before and After Instruction

Students' ability to write research proposals reflects their mastery of complex academic literacy, which includes the ability to organize ideas, develop logical reasoning, use appropriate

grammatical structures, and maintain consistency in writing mechanics and academic expression. To measure the extent of students' development in these areas, pre-tests and post-tests were conducted with 32 students from the English Literature Study Program at Universitas Persada Bunda Indonesia who were enrolled in the Linguistics Research Method (LRM) course. The results of these two tests provide a quantitative and significant overview of students' academic progress.

Before attending the LRM course, students completed a pre-test in research proposal writing. The assessment was based on five main indicators: organization, logical development of ideas, grammar, punctuation, spelling and mechanics, and style and quality of expression. The average score obtained showed that most students fell into the "fair" category, with an overall score of 54. The scores for each indicator are shown in Table 1 below:

Table 1 Pre-Test Results Before LRM Course

Assessment Indicator	Average Score	Category
Organization Difficulties	50	Fair
Logical Development of Ideas Difficulties	55	Fair
Grammar Difficulties	50	Fair
Punctuation, Spelling and Mechanics Difficulties	55	Fair
Style and Quality of Expression Difficulties	60	Fair
Overall Average Score	54	Fair

Source: Research Analysis, 2025

The data above indicates that students still experienced difficulties in writing structured and coherent proposals. They had not yet fully developed the ability to construct a logical framework of ideas and present them using adequate academic language. In terms of academic literacy, these findings align with Peungcharoenkun & Waluyo's (2024) view that students often experience epistemic gaps in understanding academic writing genres, particularly at the early stages of higher education.

After completing the LRM course, students were given a post-test to measure the impact of instructional intervention on their writing abilities. The results showed a significant improvement, with the overall average score reaching 72, and all aspects falling within the "very good" category. The detailed post-test results are presented in Table 2 below:

Table 2 Post-Test Results After LRM Course

Assessment Indicator	Average Score	Category
Organization Difficulties	70	Very Good
Logical Development of Ideas Difficulties	75	Very Good
Grammar Difficulties	70	Very Good
Punctuation, Spelling and Mechanics Difficulties	70	Very Good
Style and Quality of Expression Difficulties	75	Very Good
Overall Average Score	72	Very Good

Source: Research Analysis, 2025

The significant increase from a score of 54 to 72 indicates the success of a pedagogical intervention using a quantitative method in helping students understand and apply the conventions of research proposal writing. The structured, practical, and task-based learning approach used in the LRM course appeared to give students the opportunity to practice systematically and receive constructive feedback. This supports Phyo et al.'s (2025) argument that academic literacy improvement requires not only instructional approaches but also reflective and participatory methods.

To more clearly observe the progress, Table 3 presents a comparison of pre-test and post-test scores by indicator:

Table 3 Comparison of Pre-Test and Post-Test Scores

Assessment Indicator	Pre-Test Score	Post-Test Score	Difference
Organization Difficulties	50	70	+20
Logical Development of Ideas Difficulties	55	75	+20
Grammar Difficulties	50	70	+20
Punctuation, Spelling and Mechanics Difficulties	55	70	+15
Style and Quality of Expression Difficulties	60	75	+15
Overall Average	54	72	+18

Source: Research Analysis, 2025

From the table above, the greatest improvements occurred in the areas of organization and logical development of ideas, each increasing by 20 points. This indicates that the LRM course successfully equipped students with the skills to construct logical and argumentative proposal structures, as well as to clarify the focus and direction of their intended research. Improvements in grammar and mechanics also strengthened the technical cohesion and coherence of their writing.

This progress also reflects the importance of systematic pedagogical interventions in building students' capacity for scientific thinking. Previous research by Chang et al. (2025) demonstrated that students are more likely to master academic genres when they are encouraged to reflect on the relationship between text structure and scholarly purpose. Thus, academic writing success lies not just in repeated practice but in understanding the epistemological structure of a scientific work.

The score increase indicates a shift in students' academic abilities from the "fair" to the "very good" category. This improvement not only confirms the effectiveness of a quantitative-method-based instructional model for proposal writing but also demonstrates that with appropriate teaching strategies, even novice students can overcome the cognitive and linguistic barriers that once limited them. These findings reaffirm the importance of a curriculum design that emphasizes research skill development early on as part of students' academic identity formation.

Types of Difficulties Faced by Students in Writing Research Proposals

Writing a research proposal is a crucial phase in students' academic journey, particularly at the higher education level. This skill not only demands a profound conceptual understanding but also requires critical, systematic, and communicative thinking. However, numerous studies have shown that many students face significant challenges in writing research proposals, both in conceptual and technical aspects. As noted by Li (2024), while students' writing may be grammatically correct, the meaning is often unclear due to weak thinking structure, repetition of ideas, and the use of ambiguous terminology. In the context of EFL (English as a Foreign Language) students, Wulandari et al. (2021) revealed that the main challenges include organizing ideas, developing arguments, and employing appropriate academic vocabulary. Meanwhile, Nguyen & Barrot (2024) observed that surface-level difficulties—such as incorrect verb and preposition usage—often dominate, even though students' attitudes toward writing are generally positive.

Based on the questionnaire results distributed to students in the Linguistics Research Method course, the researcher identified three main categories of difficulties: writing the background and problem statement, literature review, and research methods. Each of these categories contains sub-aspects that represent critical pain points in students' proposal-writing skills.

Data in Table 4 show that students experience very high levels of difficulty in defining topic-related terms (average score 3.4), identifying the research focus (3.5), and distinguishing between background and literature review (3.4). The most prominent challenges appear in their ability to identify the research gap (3.78) and clearly describe research procedures (3.63). These findings reflect students' limited skills in synthesis and in connecting research problems to relevant theoretical contexts. As Chen et al. (2025) emphasized, academic writing proficiency is inseparable from critical literacy and the ability to construct coherent arguments.

Table 4 Students' Difficulties in Writing Background and Problem Statement

No	Assessed Aspect	Average Score	Category
1	Defining key terms	3.4	High
2	Identifying research focus	3.5	High
3	Distinguishing background and literature review	3.4	High
4	Narrowing the research problem	3.63	Very High
5	Using simple language	3.66	Very High
6	Identifying the research gap	3.78	Very High
7	Describing research procedures	3.63	Very High
	Total Average	3.57	Very High

Source: Research Analysis, 2025

The average score of 3.57 indicates that difficulties in writing the introductory sections of a proposal are considered very high. This supports the argument by Strochenko et al. (2025) that EFL students often struggle to articulate ideas systematically and logically in academic texts. In

the literature review section, students also demonstrated very high levels of difficulty, with an overall average score of 3.69 (see Table 5). These challenges include identifying recent sources (3.66), conducting critical analysis (3.69), and linking the research problem with objectives and previous literature (3.63). A notable finding is the high level of difficulty in using citation tools such as Mendeley (3.78), indicating a gap in students' digital technical skills in reference management. Correspondingly, the study by Khotimah et al. (2022) emphasized the importance of integrating IT skills into academic writing instruction.

Table 5 Students' Difficulties in Writing Literature Review

No	Assessed Aspect	Average Score	Category
1	Identifying recent sources	3.66	Very High
2	Critical analysis of scholarly work	3.69	Very High
3	Identifying key issues	3.63	Very High
4	Reviewing literature	3.69	Very High
5	Convincing readers of the research significance	3.69	Very High
6	Identifying current issues	3.78	Very High
7	Connecting problems, objectives, and literature	3.63	Very High
8	Citing previous studies	3.69	Very High
9	Using Mendeley application	3.78	Very High
10	Citing studies related to the topic	3.69	Very High
	Total Average	3.69	Very High

Source: Research Analysis, 2025

These difficulties reveal that students lack a strong research habit, particularly in searching for academic literature, evaluating source validity, and constructing arguments. In this context, the use of a scaffolding-based pedagogical approach, as developed by Hyland (2022), becomes highly relevant in teaching academic writing.

The methods section is equally complex. As shown in Table 6, students encountered the greatest difficulties in formulating hypotheses (3.96), constructing conceptual frameworks (3.69), and selecting data collection techniques and instruments (each 3.69). These challenges reflect a limited understanding of methodological approaches, especially within the context of quantitative research. This aligns with findings by Eubanks & Schaeffer (2020), who argue that many students still lack comprehension of the relationship between problem formulation, analytical techniques, and variable selection.

These difficulties in the methods section indicate an urgent need to enhance the teaching of research methodology using practice-based and case study approaches. Furthermore, training in data analysis tools such as SPSS or jamovi could serve as strategic solutions to bridge this gap. Students' experiences in writing research proposals show that their difficulties are systemic and complex, spanning conceptual, technical, and digital aspects. The fact that all three main areas— background, literature review, and methods—were rated as "very high" in difficulty suggests that this academic process requires greater pedagogical attention. Curriculum interventions, practice-based academic training, and the integration of digital tools could be key to addressing these

challenges.

Table 6 Students' Difficulties in Writing Research Methods

No	Assessed Aspect	Average Score	Category
1	Constructing a conceptual framework	3.69	Very High
2	Choosing data collection techniques	3.69	Very High
3	Determining data analysis techniques	3.69	Very High
4	Selecting data collection instruments	3.69	Very High
5	Formulating hypotheses	3.96	Very High
6	Conducting quantitative research	3.63	Very High
	Total Average	3.68	Very High

Source: Research Analysis, 2025

Epistemic Barriers and Access to Academic Discourse

Students' difficulties in writing research proposals cannot be simply reduced to personal shortcomings or a lack of individual technical skills. Rather, these difficulties should be understood within a broader structural and epistemic framework—as manifestations of unequal access to academic discourse and institutional barriers in acquiring scientific literacy. Gatcho & Ramos (2020) view academic literacy practices as social processes shaped by institutional norms, power relations, and unequal access to sources of knowledge. Academic writing is not merely a linguistic activity, but a negotiation of meaning within institutional landscapes that carry their own expectations—often left unspoken to students.

The student respondents in this study, as reflected in the quantitative findings, struggled in almost all aspects of proposal writing—from composing the background and formulating the problem to reviewing the literature and constructing research methodology. Yet beyond these statistics lies a deeper social reality. One interviewed student, referred to as R, expressed: "I don't even know where to begin reading, let alone writing. The lecturer just said 'look at previous research,' but I don't know where to find it." This statement reveals an epistemological confusion stemming from a lack of transparency in the instructional structure and insufficient personal guidance. It shows that the struggle to write is not merely due to a lack of motivation or ability but rather to disrupted access to the necessary knowledge tools.

Field observations in several sessions of the "Linguistic Research Methodology" course confirmed these issues. Students appeared passive during class discussions, not because they lacked ideas, but because they were unclear about what was expected of them. Some opened their laptops, seemingly searching for old files rather than taking notes or reading academic references. When the lecturer explained concepts like "research gap" or "state of the art," no students took notes or asked follow-up questions. This reflects a silent struggle—an internalized tension students face when confronted with academic discourse that feels foreign and non-negotiable.

Inequitable access to academic literature is another key factor contributing to these epistemic barriers. At the university where this study was conducted, access to reputable

academic journals was very limited. The library was not adequately integrated with national or international digital journal portals. Another student, A, admitted to never having used reference management software like Mendeley because "it was never taught in a practical way." This highlights the gap between high institutional expectations and low pedagogical support. In this context, Attard (2018) argues that higher education institutions often place students in a subordinate position within literacy practices, adhering to what she terms the autonomous model of literacy—the assumption that literacy is a neutral skill set applicable by anyone, anytime, when in fact it is deeply embedded in sociocultural contexts and access to knowledge.

These inequities are further exacerbated by curricula that prioritize academic outputs (proposals/journals) over sustained mentorship processes. The lack of individualized mentoring leaves students without sufficient space to ask questions, engage in discussion, or reflect on their own understanding. They feel assessed solely on the quality of their final product, not on the process of arriving there. Such an educational model risks producing compliance-based learning rather than critical academic engagement.

In this environment, students experience what Cer (2019) describes as institutional non-transparency—a lack of clarity and openness in communicating academic norms, leaving students unaware of assessment standards, lecturer expectations, or the rhetorical structures required in academic writing. As a result, they are forced to imitate existing models—often without systematic explanation—leading to proposals that may formally follow the correct structure but are uncommunicative, decontextualized, and lacking critical engagement.

The primary challenge students face is not merely mastering English as an academic language, but navigating the systemic complexity that hinders their access to and understanding of academic discourse itself. These epistemic barriers are structural in nature and must be addressed through a reformulation of learning approaches, enhanced academic mentoring, and improved access to equitable and sustainable sources of scholarly literacy. Without such changes, epistemic inequality will continue to reinforce top-down knowledge domination, distancing students from intellectual autonomy and meaningful participation in the academic ecosystem.

Critical Learning and the Role of Transformative Pedagogy

Educational transformation does not occur merely when students are able to structure their research proposals correctly, but when they begin to understand why a proposal must be structured in a certain way, what its purpose is, and how ideas can be negotiated within a broader scientific framework. This transformation was evident in the Literacy Research Method (LRM) course, which became a bright spot amid the structural challenges and epistemic barriers previously described. Teaching grounded in a critical and communicative approach proved to be a liberating space for students.

In one observed session, the LRM lecturer did not focus solely on technical proposal structures, but began by posing reflective questions such as, "Why is this topic worth researching?" or "What impact could this study have if taken seriously?" The class atmosphere

was relaxed. Students were asked to present their ideas and encouraged to provide feedback to one another—not merely to correct mistakes, but to sharpen arguments and broaden perspectives. This process shifted the student's role from passive recipients of information to active participants in knowledge construction. One student, D, remarked: "This is the first class where I feel like I can talk about my ideas without being afraid of being wrong or sounding stupid." This statement reflects the emergence of a safe space for open academic expression.

Strochenko et al. (2025) argue that academic support should not stop at teaching writing skills, but should foster epistemic awareness—a critical understanding of how knowledge is constructed, communicated, and validated in academic contexts. In this light, the LRM course was not merely technical guidance but a form of transformative pedagogy that enabled students to see the connection between proposal structures and scientific reasoning. It not only boosted their confidence but also helped them realize that a proposal is not an administrative document but an intellectual statement that positions them in scholarly dialogue.

Throughout the observation, there were meaningful turning points: students debated over their chosen titles, began questioning the validity of sources they had found, and started comparing quantitative and qualitative approaches based on methodological fit rather than convenience. These changes were also visible in their written assignments, which moved beyond copy-pasting and demonstrated efforts to build more cohesive argumentative structures. This reveals the importance of a pedagogical approach that is both humanistic and open—where the lecturer is no longer the "final evaluator" but a facilitator of scientific thinking.

Another student, S, shared that they felt they had gained a deeper understanding of "academic ways of thinking" because "in that class, we weren't just told to write, but asked why we were writing that way." This testimony reinforces the idea that academic literacy is a social practice that requires dialogic space, not just technical training. This aligns with Khotimah et al. (2022), who emphasize that academic success cannot be achieved by merely following formal templates, but by internalizing the discursive practices of academic communities—a process shaped by social relations and pedagogical orientation.

This transformation did not occur spontaneously. It was the result of a teaching process that positioned students as empowered individuals with intellectual potential, rather than passive subjects expected to conform to institutional standards uncritically. This is the essence of transformative pedagogy: it opens a space for students to understand that they are not merely learning how to write a proposal, but are in the process of forming their own academic identity. Such an approach not only improves academic output quality but also fosters epistemic empowerment—an intrinsic drive to think, question, and inquire, even beyond the classroom.

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that the struggle of English literature students in writing research proposals is not merely a matter of individual linguistic deficiency, but rather a reflection of

deeper structural barriers involving unequal access to academic literacy, limited epistemic awareness, and asymmetrical power relations within educational institutions. While the LRM course significantly enhanced students' technical writing abilities—evidenced by improved post-test scores and better organization, clarity, and style—it alone could not fully resolve challenges rooted in students' limited familiarity with the academic discourse community. These persistent difficulties, particularly in articulating research focus and engaging with literature critically, underscore the need for a transformative pedagogical approach that goes beyond skills-based instruction. The study's key contribution lies in revealing how academic gatekeeping, hidden curricula, and lack of inclusive mentoring perpetuate knowledge hierarchies and hinder students' entry into scholarly practice. Therefore, fostering critical academic literacy and epistemic access must be prioritized as a pedagogical imperative, especially in contexts where students operate in a second language and are navigating complex academic norms without adequate support.

ETHICAL STATEMENT AND DISCLOSURE

This study was conducted in accordance with established ethical principles, including informed consent, protection of informants' confidentiality, and respect for local cultural values. Special consideration was given to participants from vulnerable groups to ensure their safety, comfort, and equal rights to participate. No external funding was received, and the authors declare no conflict of interest. All data and information presented were collected through valid research methods and have been verified to ensure their accuracy and reliability. The use of artificial intelligence (AI) was limited to technical assistance for writing and language editing, without influencing the scientific substance of the work. The authors express their gratitude to the informants for their valuable insights, and to the anonymous reviewers for their constructive feedback on an earlier version of this manuscript. The authors take full responsibility for the content and conclusions of this article.

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