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Between Translation and Self-Expression: A Study of Authorial Voice in AI-Assisted English Writing among Hindi-Medium Undergraduates in Small-Town India

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ABSTRACT

English is the language of university success in India, yet for many undergraduates who studied in Hindi-medium schools in small towns it remains a language they write in rather than from. The recent spread of free machine translation and generative AI tools has put a fluent English-writing partner in the pocket of these students. This paper asks what happens to authorial voice when such students move between Hindi thought and English text with the help of AI. Drawing on research on voice and identity in second language writing, translanguaging, English in Indian education, and early work on machine-assisted writing, the paper develops a three-part framework of translation, mediation and ownership. It argues that AI assistance can widen access to academic English but can also flatten the regional, emotional and cultural texture of a student's expression, and that the outcome depends less on the tool than on how drafting practices are organised and taught. The paper closes with a mixed-methods research design suited to small-town colleges and with pedagogical recommendations. No new empirical data are reported; the study is a conceptual, review-based contribution meant to guide fieldwork.

KEYWORDS: *authorial voice; second language writing; generative AI; translanguaging; Hindi-medium students; Indian higher education.*

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1. INTRODUCTION

Imagine a second-year B.A. student in a government degree college in a district town of Uttar Pradesh. She has been a reasonably good student all her life. In school she read her textbooks in Hindi, answered examinations in Hindi, and spoke to her teachers in Hindi mixed with the local variety of her region. English was a subject, something to be passed, not a language in which she explained herself. Now, in college, her assignment is to write a short essay in English on her experience of learning. She knows exactly what she wants to say. She can say it, in fact, in two or three sentences of Hindi that would make her classmates laugh or nod. But when she sits down to write in English, the sentences that come are stiff, and she can feel that they are not hers.

A few years ago, her options would have been limited to a bilingual dictionary, a senior's notebook or a guidebook full of model answers. Today she has a phone. She can type her Hindi sentences into a translation app, or ask a chatbot to "write this properly in English." Within seconds she receives a paragraph that is grammatical, balanced and polite. It is also, quite possibly, a paragraph she could not have written and would not have said. The question this paper takes up lies in that gap: when AI tools supply the English, whose voice is on the page?

The question matters because English in Indian higher education is not a neutral medium. It works as a gatekeeper to jobs, to postgraduate admissions and to social standing (Annamalai, 2004; Graddol, 2010). Students from Hindi-medium backgrounds, especially in small towns where English exposure outside the classroom is thin, often enter college already positioned as "weak in English," and this label can shape how they see themselves as thinkers. AI tools promise to reduce that disadvantage, and in some respects they do. But writing is more than correct sentences. It is also the way a person shows who she

is, what she believes and how she relates to her reader, which scholars of academic writing call authorial voice or identity (Hyland, 2002; Ivanič, 1998; Matsuda, 2015).

This paper is a conceptual and review-based study. Its aim is to bring together three bodies of work that are rarely read together: research on voice and identity in second language writing, research on multilingualism and English in India, and the fast-growing literature on machine translation and generative AI in language learning. From these, it builds a framework for studying Hindi-medium undergraduates in small-town India and proposes a research design for doing so. We are deliberate about what the paper does not do. It does not report survey or interview findings of its own, and the figures that appear in it are conceptual illustrations, not data. Where claims are made about students, they are drawn from the cited literature or are explicitly marked as hypotheses to be tested. The paper is organised as follows. Section 2 describes the context. Section 3 sets out the theoretical framework. Section 4 reviews research on AI and second language writing. Section 5 proposes a research design. Sections 6 and 7 discuss the main tensions and their pedagogical implications, and Sections 8 and 9 note limitations and conclude.

2. The Context: English, Hindi and the Small-Town Classroom

2.1. A language hierarchy that students already know

India is one of the most linguistically diverse countries in the world, and Hindi is the largest language by number of declared mother-tongue speakers, accounting for roughly 44 per cent of the population in the 2011 Census (Census of India, 2011). Yet the everyday prestige of Hindi sits beneath that of English in education and employment. Annamalai (2004) described English in India as a "medium of power": it is not simply one language among many but the language through which access to higher education, professional careers and national and global mobility is controlled. Mohanty (2006) made a related argument when he spoke of the "multilingualism of the unequals," meaning that in India the many languages a person may know are not equally valued, and that children from tribal and rural backgrounds are often schooled in languages that give them the least social leverage.

Hindi-medium students in small towns experience this hierarchy in concrete ways. Meganathan (2011) shows how English teaching in Indian schools has long been shaped by uneven resources, by teachers who themselves learnt English as a school subject, and by the gap between what the curriculum expects and what classrooms can deliver. Vaish (2008), writing about biliteracy and globalisation, documents how families across social classes now invest hopes in English as the route to upward mobility, even when schools are poorly placed to deliver it. The result is a student who is highly motivated to write well in English and acutely aware of not doing so.

2.2. English as an Indian language

It would be a mistake to treat English in India only as a foreign import. Kachru (1986) argued that English in postcolonial settings such as India has developed into local varieties with their own norms, uses and literary traditions, and that these varieties should be understood as legitimate in their own right and not as failed attempts at British or American English. Phillipson (1992), from a more critical angle, reminded us that the global spread of English is tied to unequal power relations, and that a language can be both a resource and a means of exclusion. Both positions are useful here. A Hindi-medium student writing in English is simultaneously joining a large Indian community of English users and entering a space where a particular standard is rewarded. Bourdieu's (1991) idea of linguistic capital helps to explain why: some ways of speaking and writing carry social value, and those who do not hold them are quietly marked as lesser, whatever the quality of their ideas.

2.3. Why small towns

Most research on academic writing in India has been done in metropolitan or elite institutions, where students arrive with a more varied English repertoire. Small-town colleges are different in at least three ways. English is rarely heard outside the classroom, so students have fewer informal opportunities to build a sense of how English "sounds." Class sizes are often large and feedback on writing is limited. And access to AI tools, though it has spread rapidly through low-cost smartphones and mobile data, is typically self-taught, with little guidance from teachers who may themselves be uncertain about how to respond. We do not claim that these conditions are uniform; they will vary across states, colleges and individuals. But they make small-town Hindi-medium undergraduates a theoretically interesting group, because the distance between their language of thought and their language of assessment is large, and the temptation to bridge it with technology is correspondingly strong.

3. Theoretical Framework: Voice, Identity and Translanguaging

3.1. What is "voice" in academic writing?

"Voice" is a slippery term. In everyday talk it often means a writer's personal style, something like a

fingerprint. Writing researchers have argued that this view is too simple. Matsuda (2001) proposed that voice is the result of both discursive and non-discursive features that a writer selects, consciously or not, from the repertoires that society makes available. Such features include word choice, sentence rhythm, the stance a writer takes and also the layout of the text and the choice of language itself. In a later review, Matsuda (2015) noted that research on identity in written discourse has moved away from the idea of a fixed inner self and towards a view in which identity is constructed, and sometimes contested, in the act of writing.

Ivanič (1998) offers a particularly useful way of thinking about this. She distinguishes the autobiographical self, which a writer brings from her life history; the discoursal self, which is the impression she creates in a specific piece of writing; and the self as author, which is the degree of authority and ownership she claims over her content. Writers also draw on possibilities for selfhood, the identities that their social and institutional environment makes available. Clark and Ivanič (1997) argue that writing is therefore always political: students are not simply expressing themselves but choosing, or being pushed towards, positions that the academy rewards. For Hindi-medium students, the discoursal self that English academic writing makes available may feel distant from their autobiographical self, and this distance is the space in which AI tools now operate.

Hyland (2002), studying the use of first-person pronouns by L2 writers, showed that second language students often avoid presenting themselves as authors, writing in a more impersonal register than expert writers do. He called this a kind of authorial "invisibility." Part of this may be explained by what students have been taught: many are told that academic writing should be impersonal. But part of it may reflect the greater risk that L2 writers feel when they commit to a position in a language, they do not fully command. Seen this way, a tool that produces confident, fluent English may seem to remove the risk, but it may also remove the author.

3.2. Cautions against cultural stereotyping

Any discussion of "Indian" or "Hindi" ways of writing has to be careful. Early contrastive rhetoric research, beginning with work in the 1960s, suggested that writers from different cultures organise ideas in characteristic patterns. This line of work has been criticised for turning complex, changing practices into stereotypes. Kubota and Lehner (2004) called for a critical contrastive rhetoric that attends to power, history and the diversity of writers inside any one culture. Ramanathan and Atkinson (1999) similarly questioned the assumption, common in North American writing instruction, that the individual, original, self-expressive author is a universal ideal, noting that it reflects particular cultural and educational traditions. We take both warnings seriously. This paper does not assume that Hindi-medium students share a single "Hindi rhetorical style." It assumes only that they draw on a linguistic and cultural repertoire that differs from the one valued in most English-medium academic assessment, and that how they negotiate this difference is a matter for empirical study.

3.3. Translation, translanguaging and codemeshing

Silva (1993) argued early on that second language writing differs from first language writing in strategic, rhetorical and linguistic ways, and cannot simply be explained by L1 writing theory. One of the differences is that L2 writers often move between languages while composing, planning in one and drafting in another. For many years this was treated as a problem, sometimes called "interference." More recent work reframes it. García and Li Wei (2014) describe translanguaging as the flexible use of a speaker's whole linguistic repertoire, rather than as the switching between separate, bounded languages. Canagarajah (2013) extends this to writing, arguing that multilingual writers can treat their languages as resources to be woven together, and that this weaving is a form of skill and not of deficit. In a classroom study, Canagarajah (2011) described codemeshing, in which students deliberately blend elements from different languages in academic text, and showed how this can be taught as a rhetorical strategy.

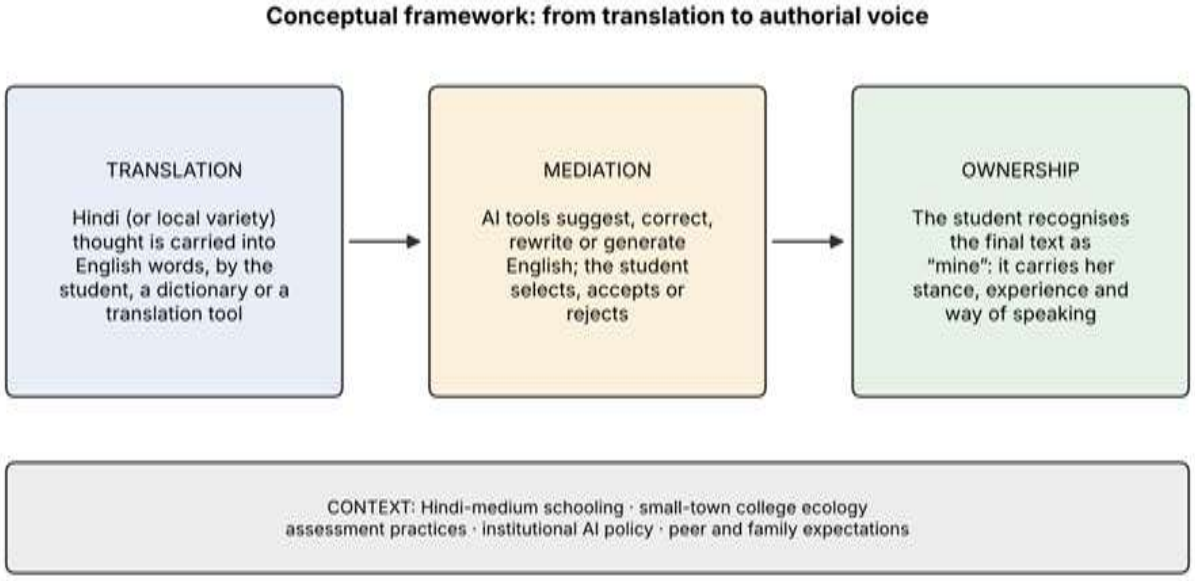
Two further ideas help. Bakhtin (1981) wrote that words are never neutral: every word we use has been used by others, carries their intentions, and has to be appropriated and made our own. Learning to write in a second language is, in this sense, an exercise in appropriation, and appropriation is exactly what an AI tool can short-circuit if it hands over finished language that has not yet been struggled with. And Pavlenko (2005) has shown that bilingual speakers often experience the same word as emotionally weaker or stronger depending on the language in which it is spoken. If a student's strongest feelings about family, hardship or ambition live in Hindi, then a smooth English translation may be accurate in meaning and yet strangely cold.

3.4. The three-part framework

From these strands we build a simple framework with three moments: translation, mediation and ownership (Figure 1). Translation refers to the movement of ideas from Hindi or a local variety into English,

whether done by the student alone or with a tool. Mediation refers to the role of AI in suggesting, correcting, rewriting or generating English; here the student is a decision-maker who accepts, rejects or modifies what is offered. Ownership refers to whether the final text feels like the student's own, in the sense of carrying her stance, experience and manner of speaking, and whether she can explain and defend it. All three are shaped by context: the student's schooling, the ecology of her college, the way teachers assess writing and the institution's policy on AI.

Figure 1. Conceptual framework linking translation, AI mediation and ownership of text, within a context of schooling, college ecology and policy.



Source: author's synthesis of Hyland (2002), Ivanič (1998), García and Li Wei (2014) and Canagarajah (2013).

4. AI, Machine Translation and Second Language Writing: What We Know

4.1. Machine translation in student drafting

Before generative AI, the main technology that language learners used for writing was machine translation. Tsai (2019) investigated the use of Google Translate in EFL drafts and reported that students who used the tool wrote longer drafts with more accurate vocabulary and expression than those who did not. Lee (2020) examined the effect of machine translation on EFL students' writing over a course and reported gains in writing performance together with generally positive attitudes towards the tool. Both studies were conducted in East Asian settings, with learners whose first languages and educational systems differ from those of Hindi-medium students in India, so their findings should not be transferred without care. They are still instructive because they point to a pattern: machine translation tends to help with accuracy and lexical range, while leaving open the question of what happens to students' own meaning-making.

4.2. Generative AI: potential and pitfalls

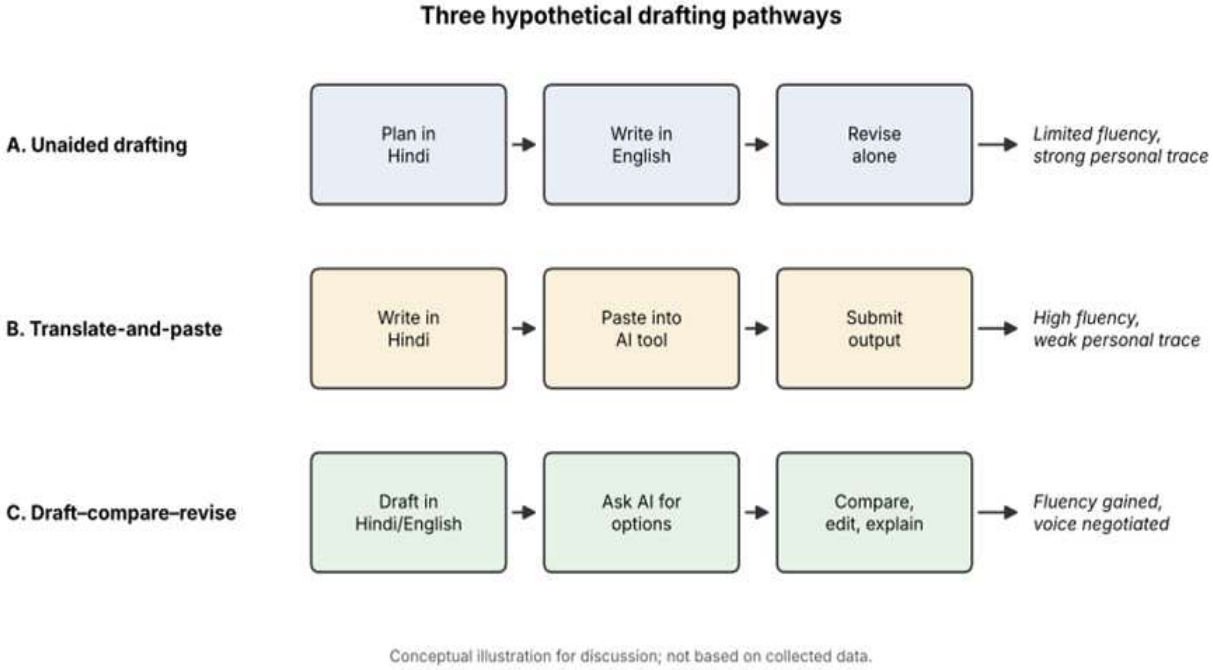
Generative AI tools have widened the possibilities. Barrot (2023) reviewed the use of ChatGPT in second language writing and described both its potential, such as generating ideas, providing feedback and supporting revision, and its pitfalls, including accuracy problems, ethical concerns about authorship and plagiarism, and the risk that learners rely on the tool at the expense of developing their own skills. A common theme across the early literature is that the same tool can be a scaffold or a substitute, depending on how it is used. A student who asks the tool to explain why her sentence sounds awkward is doing something very different from one who pastes in a Hindi paragraph and submits whatever returns.

What is largely missing from this literature, so far as we can tell, is attention to voice as a lived and relational matter, and attention to Indian small-town contexts. Studies tend to measure quality, accuracy or attitudes, and they tend to be conducted in contexts where students have had a good deal of English instruction. We found little work that asks how students from Hindi-medium backgrounds experience the relationship between their own expression and AI-produced English. This is the gap the present paper addresses, though we acknowledge that more studies may exist than we have located and that the field is moving quickly. Readers should treat this review as selective and should check for recent work before designing a study.

4.3. The detection problem

One further strand deserves mention because it affects students' choices directly. As institutions have grown anxious about AI-generated work, many have turned to software that claims to detect it. Liang et al. (2023) tested several widely used detectors and found that they frequently misclassified essays written by non-native English speakers as AI-generated, while performing much better on essays by native speakers. In other words, plain, structurally simple English, which is exactly what many L2 writers produce, can look "machine-like" to a detector. For Hindi-medium students this has an uncomfortable implication. A student who writes honestly in her limited English may be suspected, while one who polishes her text with a tool and then edits it may escape notice. A policy built on detection alone could therefore punish the very students it hopes to protect, and it may encourage others to hide their use of AI instead of discussing it.

Figure 2. Three hypothetical drafting pathways and their expected consequences for voice. These are hypotheses for testing and are not based on collected data.



Source: author's illustration.

5. Proposed Research Design

Because this paper is conceptual, the design below is a proposal. It is meant to show how the framework could be tested in small-town colleges, and it is written so that a researcher with limited resources could carry it out. The guiding research questions are: (RQ1) How do Hindi-medium undergraduates describe their use of translation and AI tools when writing in English? (RQ2) How do the texts they produce with and without such tools differ in features associated with authorial voice? (RQ3) How do students judge ownership of AI-assisted texts, and what do they do to make a text "theirs"?

5.1. Participants and setting

We suggest purposive sampling of undergraduates in the first or second year of arts, commerce or science programmes at three to four colleges located in towns outside major metropolitan areas, all of whom completed secondary schooling in Hindi-medium institutions. A sample of 30 to 40 students for the writing and interview components, with a larger survey sample if resources allow, would be enough for a rich qualitative study. Participation would be voluntary and students' grades would not be affected by what they disclose. Institutional ethics approval, informed consent in Hindi and English, anonymised data and the option to withdraw at any point would be basic requirements, and it would be important to state clearly that the study is not an investigation of misconduct.

5.2. Data collection

The design uses three connected sources of data (Table 1). First, participants would complete short writing tasks of about 250 to 300 words on a personal topic, such as describing a decision that mattered to them, under three conditions: unaided, with a translation tool, and with a generative AI tool of their choice. The order of conditions would be rotated across participants. Screen recordings or keystroke logs, with consent, would capture drafting

behaviour. Second, the texts would be analysed for features related to voice: first-person reference and stance markers (following Hyland, 2002), the presence of idiom, example and culturally specific detail, sentence rhythm and variety, and traces of Hindi-influenced phrasing. Third, each participant would take part in a stimulated-recall interview, conducted in Hindi by default, in which she would watch her own drafting and comment on the choices she made, and would then be asked to point to the parts of each text that feel most and least like her own.

Table 1. Proposed research design: questions, data sources and analytic focus

Research question	Data source	Main analytic focus
RQ1: How students describe tool use	Stimulated-recall interviews (in Hindi); short background questionnaire	Reasons for use, attitudes, feelings about ownership; reflexive thematic analysis
RQ2: Differences in voice features	Writing tasks under three conditions; screen recordings	Stance and first-person markers, idiom, specificity, rhythm, Hindi-influenced phrasing
RQ3: Ownership and ways of making a text "mine"	Interviews with text-marking task; draft histories	Passages marked as "mine" or "not mine"; editing moves; ability to explain choices

5.3. Analysis

Interview data would be transcribed in the language spoken and analysed through reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Quotations used in reporting would be translated into English, and a second bilingual reader would check a sample of translations to guard against loss of nuance, a concern that is, of course, closely related to the subject of the study. Text features would be coded using a scheme developed from the voice literature and piloted on a small set of texts; two coders would work independently and discuss disagreements. The strength of such a design lies in the triangulation of what students say, what they do while drafting, and what the resulting texts look like. Its main weakness is that writing tasks done in a research setting may not reflect how students write for real assignments, and this limitation should be discussed openly in any report.

6. Discussion: Four Tensions

Since this paper does not report new data, the discussion below is analytical. It identifies four tensions that the literature suggests will be central, and it states each as a question for empirical work, not as a conclusion.

6.1. Translation as thinking versus translation as substitution

Translation is not always a shortcut. For multilingual writers it can be a way of thinking: working out an idea in the language where it is clearest, then finding ways of carrying it across. Translanguaging scholars would say that a student who plans in Hindi and drafts in English is using her full repertoire sensibly (García & Li Wei, 2014). The risk lies not in the movement between languages but in who does the carrying. When the student herself searches for words, she makes many small decisions about what to keep, what to drop and what to compromise. When a tool does the carrying, those decisions are made for her, often invisibly. The first is translation as thinking; the second, if it becomes habitual, is translation as substitution. A key empirical question is how often, and under what conditions, students move from one to the other.

6.2. Borrowed fluency and the "polished but not mine" problem

A second tension concerns the quality of what comes back. AI output tends to be fluent, balanced and generic. For students whose own English is halting, this fluency is attractive and can be encouraging. It can show what a well-formed paragraph looks like. But fluency of this kind is also a flattening force. Idioms drawn from a student's home language, a reference to a village festival, an emotional emphasis that does not match standard academic tone, are all likely to be smoothed away. In Bakhtin's (1981) terms, the student receives words already saturated with other people's intentions and has to decide whether to make them her own. Some students may do so by editing and adding detail; others may simply submit. We hypothesise that the difference will show in how well the student can explain and defend the text in her own words, which is why the interviews in the proposed design ask students to do exactly that.

There is also a possible emotional dimension. If Pavlenko (2005) is right that emotional weight attaches differently to words in different languages, then the experience of reading one's own heartfelt Hindi paragraph rendered into correct but emotionally neutral English might feel like a small loss. A student may see the text is "better" and yet feel it is no longer about her. This is a matter for careful qualitative inquiry, and we do not wish to assume it. Some students may feel no such loss, or may feel relief at

having an English that sounds confident. The framework allows for both responses.

6.3. Suspicion, detection and fairness

The third tension is institutional. As noted earlier, detection tools can misidentify the writing of non-native speakers as machine-generated (Liang et al., 2023). If colleges adopt such tools without understanding their limits, students from Hindi-medium backgrounds may face the double burden of being perceived as weak writers and being suspected of cheating. At the same time, teachers who see sudden improvements in a student's English have understandable doubts. The honest answer may be that a text alone cannot reveal whether AI was used, and that the more reliable evidence is the student's ability to discuss her drafting process. Assessment designs that include short oral explanations, drafts and reflective notes shift the question from "Did you use AI?" to "Can you show what you did and why?", which is both fairer and more educational.

6.4. Is the "voice" we expect already a borrowed one?

The fourth tension is uncomfortable but necessary. If we say that AI threatens students' authentic voice, we need to ask which voice we are protecting. Ramanathan and Atkinson (1999) warned that the ideal of the original, self-expressive writer is historically specific, not universal. Canagarajah (2002) has shown how multilingual scholars from the periphery have to negotiate with Anglo-American conventions of academic writing in order to be published, often at the cost of the rhetorical preferences of their own communities. A Hindi-medium undergraduate who is trained to write in a standard academic English register is therefore already writing in a voice that is partly borrowed from elsewhere. AI makes this borrowing faster and more visible. It does not create it. This should make us cautious about romanticising "unaided" writing, and should make us ask for a kind of authorship that is plural: one in which a student may draw on Hindi, English, local varieties and technological help, and still be able to say, with justification, that the result is hers.

7. Pedagogical Implications

The literature reviewed above does not support a simple ban on AI tools, nor does it support uncritical adoption. It points rather to a set of classroom practices that treat tools as part of the writing process, that value students' home languages as thinking resources, and that make ownership visible. The following suggestions are offered as starting points for teachers in small-town colleges, and they should be tried, adapted and evaluated, not simply adopted.

First, teachers can legitimise planning in Hindi. Asking students to brainstorm and outline in whichever language they find easiest, and then to draft in English, recognises translanguaging as a normal part of multilingual composition (García & Li Wei, 2014) and removes the sense of shame that may push some students toward secret translation. Second, teachers can introduce a "draft–compare–revise" routine (the third pathway in Figure 2). Students write their own English draft first, however imperfect; they then ask an AI tool for alternatives; they compare the two line by line, and they annotate what they kept, rejected and why. This keeps the student's own attempt at the centre, turns the tool's output into material for analysis and generates a visible record of decisions.

Third, teachers can teach students to notice what is lost in smoothing. Short classroom activities in which students compare their own sentence with a polished version, and discuss which details, emotions or rhythms disappeared, build the kind of critical language awareness that protects voice. Where appropriate, teachers might invite students to practise codemeshing, deliberately keeping a Hindi word, proverb or image in an English text for rhetorical effect, as Canagarajah (2011) describes. This is not appropriate for every genre, and students should be taught when it is and is not acceptable, but it signals that their linguistic background has value.

Fourth, assessment can be redesigned. Process-based assessment, which collects drafts, reflective notes and a brief oral discussion, makes AI use discussable and reduces reliance on detectors. Clear and realistic institutional policies are also needed: policies that state what kinds of AI use are acceptable, require students to disclose use, and are communicated in language that students understand, ideally in Hindi as well as English. Finally, teacher development matters. Many college teachers have had no formal training on AI tools and may feel as uncertain as their students. Short, practical workshops in which teachers experiment with the tools themselves are likely to do better than circulars alone.

8. Limitations

This paper has several limitations. It is conceptual and offers no new empirical evidence; the claims about students are therefore hypotheses grounded in a selective reading of the literature. Much of the existing research on machine translation and AI in writing comes from East Asian and Western contexts, and its transfer to India is uncertain. The review is not systematic, and given the speed at which this area is developing, newer studies may qualify or contradict points made here. The framework simplifies a

complex reality: students' linguistic repertoires in small towns often include Hindi, regional varieties, Urdu, English and sometimes other languages, and treating "Hindi" as a single category is a convenience that fieldwork will need to refine. The figures included are conceptual diagrams, not data visualisations, and should be read as such. Finally, the proposed design relies on tasks done in research conditions, which may differ from students' everyday practice.

9. Conclusion

We began with a student sitting in front of a blank English page, holding a Hindi thought she cannot quite carry across. AI tools now offer her a bridge, and for many students that bridge will be welcome and useful. The literature suggests that the bridge is neither a threat in itself nor a solution in itself. What matters is whether the student walks across it or is carried, whether she can say what she changed along the way, and whether the person who arrives on the English side is still recognisably herself.

The framework of translation, mediation and ownership offers a way to study this. It shifts attention from the question that dominates public debate, which is whether students used AI, to questions that are more useful for teachers: how they used it, what they decided, and what they would say about the text afterwards. It also asks us to hold two things at once. On the one hand, Hindi-medium students from small towns deserve every legitimate help in gaining access to academic English. On the other, access that costs a student her sense of authorship is a thin kind of access. The task for researchers and teachers is to build writing practices in which the student's languages, her ideas and the new tools all have a place, and in which the final text can honestly be called her own. We hope the research design offered here will encourage colleagues in small-town institutions to take up that task with real students and real data.

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