


Original article

Beyond Memorisation: Reclaiming the Authority of the Book through Open-Book Examinations in Doctoral Discourse Analysis Education within the Libyan Academy for Postgraduate Studies

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Abstract

The rapid expansion of artificial intelligence (AI), digitally mediated learning environments, and accelerated access to information has reshaped how postgraduate students read, prepare for examinations, and engage with academic knowledge. In doctoral education, these changes raise a critical pedagogical question: how can assessment sustain deep scholarly reading when students increasingly rely on summaries, searchable notes, automated explanations, and AI-assisted shortcuts? This study explores the role of open-book examinations in doctoral Discourse Analysis education at the Libyan Academy for Postgraduate Studies, Janzour. It argues that in theory-intensive disciplines, conventional closed-book examinations often privilege rote recall and the reproduction of terminology, creating a mismatch with the interpretive and contextual reasoning required in Discourse Analysis. Using a qualitative interpretive design, the study integrates autoethnographic reflection with netnographic engagement. Data were drawn from the researcher's doctoral experience (2025–2026) and academic discussions among Libyan lecturers and postgraduate researchers. Thematic analysis identified recurring concerns including cognitive overload, examination anxiety, AI-mediated study strategies, text-complexity anxiety, perceptions of fairness, and the authenticity of research-oriented evaluation. Findings indicate that open-book examinations, when carefully designed, are not easier alternatives but rigorous pedagogical models. They encourage sustained engagement with primary sources, reduce reliance on memorisation, and assess higher-order analytical competence. Effective implementation requires transparent rubrics, clear resource boundaries, appropriate text selection, and alignment between learning outcomes and assessment criteria. By situating the debate within a Libyan doctoral context, this paper contributes to global discussions on assessment reform, doctoral pedagogy, and the future of scholarly reading in the AI era. Open-book assessment is positioned as a post-memorisation practice that supports independent interpretive expertise while maintaining academic rigour.

Keywords. Open-book Examinations, Doctoral Education, Discourse Analysis, Artificial Intelligence.

Introduction

The contemporary university is witnessing a profound transformation in the relationship between students, texts, and knowledge. In earlier models of higher education, particularly at the postgraduate level, academic reading was anchored in sustained engagement with foundational books, peer-reviewed articles, theoretical debates, handwritten notes, and repeated returns to the text as a space for thought rather than a mere container of information. The doctoral student was expected to sit with a text, revisit it, question it, annotate it, compare it with other sources, and gradually develop an independent scholarly position. In the current digital environment, however, the rhythm, temporality, and material experience of reading have changed significantly. Information can now be retrieved instantly; definitions can be generated automatically; theoretical models can be summarised through artificial intelligence tools; and complex texts can be reduced to short explanatory fragments. These affordances are not inherently harmful, as they may widen access to knowledge, support conceptual clarification, and improve academic productivity. Nevertheless, they introduce a serious pedagogical risk: the possible replacement of deep scholarly reading with rapid informational consumption.

This issue is particularly significant in doctoral education. A doctoral candidate is not simply a recipient of information, but a researcher in formation. At this level, academic competence is not measured by the ability to absorb or reproduce knowledge alone, but by the capacity to interpret, evaluate, synthesise, and produce knowledge. Doctoral students must learn to inhabit scholarly debates rather than merely repeat them, and to develop a critical position within those debates rather than memorise their terminology. This concern becomes especially visible in courses such as Discourse Analysis, where the academic task is not to memorise a fixed body of definitions or theoretical positions, but to understand how language produces ideology, context, power, identity, interaction, and social meaning through discourse. Discourse Analysis requires students to move across multiple theoretical frameworks, including Critical Discourse Analysis, Systemic Functional Linguistics, Pragmatics, Conversation Analysis, Multimodal Discourse Analysis, and related approaches. Each framework carries its own assumptions, terminology, and analytical procedures. Consequently, the doctoral learner must not only recognise these frameworks, but also select, justify, and apply them critically in relation to specific texts and contexts.

Despite the interpretive and analytical nature of the discipline, many postgraduate programmes continue to rely on conventional closed-book examinations as a central or mandatory form of assessment during the coursework stage. Such examinations may provide administrative clarity and institutional discipline; however, their pedagogical validity becomes questionable when they are used to assess theory-intensive and analysis-driven subjects. Closed-book examinations often require students to devote substantial cognitive energy to memorising definitions, names, terminological distinctions, and theoretical procedures, and then reproducing them under severe temporal and psychological pressure. In this sense, they may shift the centre of learning away from critical judgement, theoretical flexibility, contextual reading, and independent analytical reasoning towards short-term memory performance. A structural and epistemological gap therefore emerges between the nature of knowledge required by Discourse Analysis and the form of knowledge rewarded by closed-book assessment.

This problem has become even more complex in the age of generative artificial intelligence. When students know that an examination will depend largely on recall, it becomes understandable that they may turn to digital summaries, condensed explanations, and AI-generated outputs to manage theoretical density and time pressure. Such tools can undoubtedly support conceptual clarification, organisation of ideas, and access to knowledge. Yet excessive reliance on them may weaken direct and sustained engagement with original academic sources. In such circumstances, the book risks being transformed from a partner in thought into a reservoir of information to be compressed; the theoretical text becomes raw material for rapid summarisation rather than a site of critical dialogue. Assessment, therefore, should not be understood merely as an instrument for measuring learning. It is also a pedagogical mechanism that actively shapes the kind of learning students practise and the forms of reading they come to regard as worthy of time and intellectual effort.

Against this background, this paper argues that open-book examinations can play an important role in reclaiming the authority of the academic book within doctoral Discourse Analysis education. The argument is not that open-book examinations are easier, nor that memorisation has no place in academic development. Rather, the central claim is that, when carefully designed, open-book assessment can redirect doctoral evaluation towards the intellectual practices of research itself: consulting sources, comparing theoretical frameworks, tracing conceptual distinctions, applying concepts to data, constructing arguments, and defending interpretive choices. In this sense, the open book is not a shortcut to reduced effort; it is a demand for deeper intellectual responsibility. The availability of sources does not, by itself, produce analysis. What matters is the student's ability to use those sources critically, selectively, and methodologically in the production of a coherent scholarly interpretation.

This study is situated within the Libyan Academy for Postgraduate Studies, Janzour, and emerges from the researcher's lived experience as a doctoral student in an advanced Discourse Analysis course during the 2025–2026 academic year. It also draws on a wider academic discussion involving Libyan academics, university lecturers, and postgraduate researchers who responded to the proposal of introducing open-book examinations at the doctoral level. By combining autoethnographic reflection with netnographic analysis of stakeholder responses, the paper offers a context-sensitive contribution to international debates on assessment reform, artificial intelligence in higher education, doctoral pedagogy, and the future of deep scholarly reading in the contemporary university.

Institutional Context and Statement of the Problem

Doctoral education at the Libyan Academy for Postgraduate Studies, Janzour, follows a coursework-and-dissertation structure. During the coursework phase, doctoral candidates are required to complete a range of advanced theoretical and methodological modules before progressing to independent dissertation research. This structure is intended to prepare students for scholarly independence by exposing them to disciplinary knowledge, research methods, theoretical debates, and specialised academic practices. Within this framework, however, assessment remains largely governed by conventional examination requirements, particularly midterm and final examinations that are usually conducted under closed-book conditions.

This assessment structure creates a significant pedagogical and epistemological tension. On the one hand, doctoral education is expected to produce researchers capable of original inquiry, critical reflection, theoretical synthesis, methodological awareness, and independent scholarly contribution. On the other hand, the dominant examination model may reward short-term retention and accurate reproduction of information under pressure. This tension becomes particularly visible in advanced linguistic modules such as Discourse Analysis, where the expected learning outcomes extend far beyond the acquisition of theoretical knowledge. Students are not merely required to know theories; they are expected to interpret, evaluate, select, and apply multiple analytical frameworks to authentic linguistic, social, political, institutional, and multimodal data.

Discourse Analysis is characterised by theoretical plurality and methodological density. Doctoral students are expected to engage with a range of analytical traditions, including Critical Discourse Analysis, Systemic Functional Linguistics, Pragmatics, Conversation Analysis, Multimodal Discourse Analysis, and other related approaches. Critical Discourse Analysis, for instance, requires attention to the relationship between language, ideology, power, institutional dominance, and social inequality (Fairclough, 2010; van Dijk, 2008). Systemic Functional Linguistics directs the analyst towards the relationship between grammatical choice and ideational, interpersonal, and textual meanings (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). Pragmatics and Conversation Analysis involve the examination of speech acts, implicatures, turn-taking, sequencing, interactional organisation, and meaning in situated communication (Gee, 2014). Multimodal approaches, in turn, extend analysis beyond verbal language to include image, layout, gesture, visual design, and the interaction of semiotic resources across communicative contexts (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006).

The intellectual challenge lies not only in the number of theories students encounter, but also in the conceptual overlap among them. Many traditions address related communicative phenomena while using different terminologies, assumptions, and analytical procedures. A doctoral student may memorise definitions of ideology, modality, transitivity, implicature, interdiscursivity, speech act, framing, representation, or multimodality, yet still be unable to mobilise these concepts effectively in the analysis of a real text. Conversely, a student may understand how these concepts operate analytically but experience anxiety, hesitation, or memory lapse when required to reproduce them without access to reference materials. The problem, therefore, is not whether doctoral students should study seriously, nor whether theoretical knowledge matters. Both are essential. The more precise issue is whether closed-book examinations represent the most valid means of evaluating the kinds of competence that Discourse Analysis requires at the doctoral level.

When assessment is dominated by closed-book examinations, students are often compelled to devote substantial cognitive energy to memorising definitions, names, classifications, theoretical distinctions, and procedural steps. Under severe time pressure, this may shift attention away from interpretation, contextual reasoning, and analytical judgement towards memory performance. In such circumstances, the examination may capture the student's capacity to retain and reproduce information under pressure more than the student's ability to think as a discourse analyst. This creates a pedagogical misalignment between the nature of disciplinary knowledge and the method used to evaluate student achievement.

The local academic context adds another layer to this problem. Access to specialised and recently published academic books is not always evenly available, and doctoral students may rely heavily on digital materials, online resources, condensed notes, and AI-supported explanatory tools to manage dense theoretical content. These resources may support learning when used critically; however, under closed-book conditions, reliance on them may intensify because students are pressured to compress large bodies of theory into memorisable units. Instead of encouraging a sustained return to foundational books and primary sources, the assessment format may paradoxically push students

towards pre-digested summaries and AI-generated simplifications. In this sense, closed-book testing can unintentionally weaken the very scholarly habits it is presumed to protect.

The central issue is therefore not a simple opposition between difficult and easy examinations. Nor is it a call to remove academic rigour from postgraduate assessment. Rather, the problem concerns the extent to which existing assessment practices correspond with the intellectual realities of doctoral study in the age of artificial intelligence. If doctoral education seeks to cultivate independent researchers capable of critical inquiry, theoretical synthesis, original interpretation, and responsible engagement with scholarly sources, then assessment practices must be aligned with these aims. Evaluation systems that primarily measure information retention may not fully capture the interpretive and analytical capacities that doctoral-level scholarship requires.

The present study emerges from this educational tension. It was motivated by lived experience within a doctoral Discourse Analysis classroom, where concerns about cognitive overload, examination anxiety, theoretical density, and meaningful analytical engagement became highly visible. These experiences prompted a broader reflection on whether alternative assessment formats, particularly open-book examinations, might offer a more authentic and pedagogically aligned means of evaluating doctoral competence. The study does not claim that open-book assessment should replace all forms of evaluation, nor does it assume that access to books automatically produces better analysis. Instead, it investigates how open-book examinations might be designed contextually to support deep reading, reduce destructive examination anxiety, resist superficial AI-mediated learning, and assess the higher-order intellectual capacities expected of doctoral researchers.

Accordingly, the problem addressed in this study may be summarised as follows: conventional closed-book assessment, when applied to doctoral Discourse Analysis education, risks producing a mismatch between what the discipline requires and what the examination rewards. While the discipline demands interpretation, theoretical selection, contextual sensitivity, textual evidence, and critical judgement, the closed-book format may overvalue memorisation, recall, and performance under pressure. By examining this issue within the specific context of the Libyan Academy for Postgraduate Studies, Janzour, this paper contributes to ongoing debates concerning assessment reform, scholarly reading, doctoral pedagogy, and higher-order learning in contemporary higher education.

Although open-book examinations, digital learning, and postgraduate assessment have been discussed in different areas of higher education research, limited attention has been given to the intersection between open-book assessment, deep scholarly reading, and doctoral Discourse Analysis education in the Libyan context. More specifically, there remains a lack of qualitative research examining how doctoral students and academic stakeholders perceive open-book examinations as a means of restoring engagement with academic books in an AI-mediated learning environment. This study addresses this gap by situating open-book assessment within the lived experience of doctoral Discourse Analysis learning and within the professional reflections of Libyan academics and postgraduate researchers.

Research Objectives and Research Questions

Research Objectives

This study aims to examine the pedagogical value of open-book examinations within doctoral Discourse Analysis education at the Libyan Academy for Postgraduate Studies, Janzour, in a contemporary academic environment increasingly shaped by digital learning technologies and generative artificial intelligence. More specifically, the study seeks to:

- Examine the pedagogical limitations of traditional closed-book examinations in theory-intensive doctoral Discourse Analysis courses.
- Explore how assessment formats influence doctoral students' reading practices, study strategies, engagement with primary academic books, and use of AI-assisted learning tools.
- Analyse the cognitive and emotional experiences associated with closed-book assessment, including cognitive overload, examination anxiety, memory disruption, and analytical confidence.
- Investigate the perspectives of Libyan academics, university lecturers, and postgraduate researchers regarding the advantages, risks, and conditions of adopting open-book examinations in doctoral education.
- Evaluate the extent to which open-book examinations can support higher-order analytical thinking,

- research-oriented learning, and deeper engagement with scholarly literature.
- Propose contextually appropriate principles for designing rigorous open-book examinations in doctoral
- Discourse Analysis education while maintaining fairness, academic integrity, clarity, and research
- Authenticity.

Research Questions

To achieve these objectives, the study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1: How do traditional closed-book examinations influence the reading practices, study strategies, cognitive experiences, and psychological well-being of doctoral students in Discourse Analysis courses?

RQ2: In what ways do contemporary digital resources and AI-assisted learning tools shape doctoral students' approaches to examination preparation and engagement with academic texts?

RQ3: What perspectives do Libyan academics, university lecturers, and postgraduate researchers hold regarding the potential advantages, challenges, and conditions of open-book examinations in doctoral education?

RQ4: To what extent can open-book examinations restore the authority of the academic book and support deeper engagement with scholarly literature, higher-order analytical thinking, and research-oriented learning?

RQ5: What assessment design principles are required to implement academically rigorous open-book examinations within doctoral Discourse Analysis education while maintaining fairness, clarity, academic integrity, and authentic research-based evaluation?

Contribution of the Study

This study contributes to higher education assessment research in three main ways. First, it offers a context-sensitive account of open-book examinations within Libyan doctoral education, an area that remains underrepresented in international scholarship. Second, it links open-book assessment to the restoration of deep scholarly reading and the authority of the academic book in the age of generative AI. Third, it introduces the concept of text-complexity anxiety to describe students' fear that open-book assessment may be made punitive through excessively difficult texts. In doing so, the study moves beyond a simple comparison between open-book and closed-book examinations and instead frames assessment as a pedagogical mechanism that shapes doctoral reading practices, cognitive confidence, and research-oriented competence.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

This section situates the study within relevant debates on assessment validity, doctoral knowledge construction, higher-order cognition, deep scholarly reading, and the changing status of academic assessment in the age of generative artificial intelligence. Rather than treating open-book examinations as a purely procedural alternative to closed-book testing, the discussion frames them as a pedagogical and epistemological issue concerned with what forms of knowledge are valued, how scholarly reading is cultivated, and how doctoral competence is validly assessed.

Open-Book Examinations and Assessment Validity

Open-book examinations have often been misunderstood as a lenient or simplified alternative to conventional testing. This assumption, however, overlooks the fact that the intellectual value of any assessment depends less on its physical format than on the cognitive demand embedded in its design. If open-book questions merely require students to locate information, the format may indeed become superficial. However, when examination tasks require comparison, application, evaluation, critical justification, and theoretically informed interpretation, open-book assessment can become more demanding than closed-book testing. It removes the protective simplicity of memorised reproduction and requires students to demonstrate whether they can use knowledge intelligently, selectively, and analytically.

From the perspective of assessment validity, the central issue is alignment. A valid assessment should evaluate the competencies that a course claims to develop. In doctoral Discourse Analysis education, these competences include analytical reading, theoretical selection, contextual interpretation, textual evidence, critical reasoning, and argument construction. An assessment format that restricts access to texts, theories, and scholarly references may not fully reflect the intellectual conditions under which discourse analysis is normally conducted. Researchers do not analyse discourse in isolation from sources; they consult theoretical literature, compare concepts, revisit texts, refine

interpretations, and construct arguments in dialogue with existing scholarship. In this sense, open-book assessment is not a departure from academic rigour. When carefully designed, it may provide a closer approximation of authentic scholarly practice than an examination model centred primarily on memory performance.

Constructivism and Doctoral Knowledge Construction

The study is also informed by a constructivist understanding of learning. Constructivist learning theory views knowledge as actively constructed rather than passively received. Learners develop understanding through interaction with texts, concepts, contexts, prior knowledge, and social meaning. In doctoral education, this process becomes especially important because students are expected to move beyond acquisition towards critique, synthesis, and knowledge production. They must learn not only what theories state, but also how theories can be used, questioned, extended, and adapted within specific research problems.

Discourse Analysis is strongly compatible with this constructivist view of knowledge. Meaning is not treated as fixed or self-evident; rather, it is produced through language, interaction, institutions, social practices, ideology, and context. To learn Discourse Analysis is therefore to learn how to construct an interpretation responsibly. Assessment should support this process by allowing students to demonstrate how they make meaning through theory, textual evidence, and contextual reasoning. A closed-book examination may show whether a student can remember a concept, but an open-book examination can more effectively reveal whether that concept is sufficiently understood to be used in the construction of an analysis.

Bloom's Taxonomy and Higher-Order Cognition

Bloom's taxonomy remains useful for distinguishing between lower-order cognitive processes, such as remembering and understanding, and higher-order processes, including applying, analysing, evaluating, and creating. Doctoral education should be located primarily within the higher levels of this hierarchy. While memory remains part of academic learning, it should not dominate assessment at the expense of interpretation, evaluation, and critical judgment.

Open-book examinations can support this cognitive shift because access to information reduces the need to spend examination time reproducing memorised facts. Assessment tasks can instead ask students to interpret a text, compare theoretical approaches, justify the relevance of a framework, critique an analytical choice, or construct a coherent argument. These tasks are particularly appropriate for Discourse Analysis, where disciplinary competence depends on the ability to move between theory, text, context, and evidence. The central assessment question, therefore, shifts from "What can the student remember?" to "What can the student do with knowledge when knowledge is available?"

Deep Reading, Digital Cognition, and the Authority of the Book

The concept of deep reading is central to the present study. Deep reading involves sustained attention, slow interpretation, critical questioning, conceptual integration, and the ability to connect one argument with another. It is through this form of reading that doctoral students develop theoretical maturity and independent scholarly judgement. However, contemporary digital environments often encourage fragmented attention and accelerated forms of knowledge consumption. Search engines, summaries, short-form digital content, notifications, and AI-generated explanations may reduce the patience required for extended engagement with complex academic prose.

The authority of the book, as used in this study, should not be understood as a nostalgic attachment to printed material. Rather, the book represents a particular mode of scholarly thinking: extended argument, conceptual development, disciplinary depth, cumulative reasoning, and sustained dialogue with knowledge. In the age of AI, students may access answers quickly, but speed does not necessarily produce understanding. Open-book examinations can help restore the authority of the academic book precisely because they require students to use books actively. In this context, the book is not a hidden answer sheet. It is a scholarly tool through which students locate, compare, verify, question, and mobilise knowledge in the service of interpretation.



Generative AI and Post-Memorisation Assessment

Generative artificial intelligence has intensified debates about assessment in higher education. If information can be generated instantly, assessment models centred mainly on information reproduction become increasingly fragile. The challenge is therefore not simply to prohibit AI or to preserve traditional examination formats unchanged, but to design assessments that foreground human judgement, contextual interpretation, critical verification, and responsible use of knowledge. In this sense, the AI era strengthens the case for post-memorisation assessment. The future of academic evaluation cannot depend solely on whether students can temporarily store information. It must depend on whether they can evaluate sources, recognise conceptual distinctions, interpret data, and produce defensible arguments.

Open-book examinations, when supported by clear policies on permitted resources and academic integrity, can contribute to this shift. They make explicit that access to information is not the problem; the real concern is uncritical dependence on information without interpretation. A doctoral student may have books, notes, and selected resources available, but the final intellectual task remains human: to read closely, select appropriately, organise the argument, justify the theoretical framework, and produce analysis that is coherent, situated, and original. Within doctoral Discourse Analysis education, this orientation is particularly valuable because it aligns assessment with the actual practices of research rather than with the artificial isolation of memory-based performance.

Integrative Theoretical Position

Taken together, the theoretical perspectives discussed above provide an integrated framework for understanding the relationship between assessment design, scholarly reading, and doctoral knowledge construction in the age of generative artificial intelligence. Constructivist learning theory positions knowledge as something actively constructed through interpretation, reflection, and engagement with texts, rather than passively received or mechanically reproduced. Bloom's taxonomy clarifies the cognitive distinction between lower-order processes, such as remembering and understanding, and higher-order processes, such as applying, analysing, evaluating, and creating. Scholarship on deep reading and digital cognition further highlights the importance of sustained textual engagement at a time when academic reading is increasingly mediated by accelerated digital access, summaries, and AI-generated explanations.

Within this integrated framework, assessment is not treated as a neutral measurement instrument. Rather, it is understood as a pedagogical mechanism that shapes how students read, prepare, think, and demonstrate knowledge. If assessment privileges short-term recall, students may be encouraged to compress complex theoretical material into memorisable fragments. If, however, assessment requires interpretation, comparison, textual evidence, theoretical justification, and critical argumentation, students are more likely to engage with knowledge as researchers rather than as temporary containers of information.

This position is particularly relevant to doctoral Discourse Analysis education. Discourse Analysis requires students to construct meaning through the careful relationship between theory, text, context, ideology, interaction, and social practice. Such work cannot be reduced to the memorisation of definitions, models, or terminology. It depends on the ability to select appropriate theoretical tools, justify analytical decisions, interpret linguistic and semiotic choices, and build a coherent argument grounded in evidence. For this reason, the present study approaches open-book examinations not as a simplified assessment format, but as a potentially rigorous model of post-memorisation assessment aligned with the intellectual practices of doctoral research.

The central assumption guiding the study is therefore that assessment design influences both cognitive orientation and reading behaviour. Closed-book examinations may reinforce recall-based preparation and encourage reliance on condensed digital materials, particularly in theory-intensive courses. Open-book examinations, when carefully designed and ethically regulated, may instead encourage students to return to academic books, organise theoretical resources, engage with primary sources, and demonstrate higher-order analytical competence. This theoretical position informs the methodology, data analysis, and discussion that follow.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative interpretive research design situated within a constructivist epistemological orientation. Its purpose is not statistical generalisation, but the development of an in-depth understanding of how assessment practices are experienced, interpreted, and debated within a specific doctoral learning context. Since the study is concerned with lived experience, scholarly reading practices, assessment anxiety, AI-mediated learning strategies, and stakeholder perceptions, a qualitative approach is appropriate for capturing the complexity and situated meanings of the phenomenon under investigation.

Methodologically, the study integrates two complementary qualitative approaches: autoethnography and netnography. Autoethnography enables the researcher's lived experience as a doctoral student to become a legitimate source of scholarly inquiry if it is critically examined rather than merely narrated. In this study, the autoethnographic dimension allows for a reflexive analysis of doctoral learning, cognitive pressure, examination anxiety, and engagement with Discourse Analysis as a theory-intensive course. Netnography extends the inquiry beyond the individual experience by examining naturally occurring online academic discussion among members of the Libyan higher education community. Together, these approaches allow the study to connect the researcher's personal educational experience with broader professional discourse on postgraduate assessment reform.

The study may also be understood as a reflective pedagogical case study because it examines a particular educational issue within a clearly situated institutional and disciplinary context: doctoral Discourse Analysis education at the Libyan Academy for Postgraduate Studies, Janzour. Rather than treating the researcher's experience as an isolated personal narrative, the study places that experience in dialogue with professional academic responses, thereby producing a layered account of how open-book assessment is perceived, supported, questioned, and pedagogically justified.

Research Context

The study is situated within the doctoral programme of the Department of English at the Libyan Academy for Postgraduate Studies, Janzour. The programme follows a coursework-and-dissertation structure in which doctoral candidates complete a series of advanced theoretical and methodological modules before progressing to independent doctoral research. Attention is given to the Discourse Analysis course because it represents a theory-intensive module that requires engagement with multiple analytical traditions and complex textual data.

Discourse Analysis provides a particularly suitable context for examining the relationship between assessment design, scholarly reading practices, AI-mediated study strategies, and doctoral-level analytical competence. The course requires students to move across theoretical frameworks, distinguish between overlapping concepts, and apply analytical tools to authentic linguistic, social, institutional, political, and multimodal data. It therefore offers a rich pedagogical site for investigating whether closed-book examinations adequately reflect the intellectual practices expected of doctoral researchers, and whether open-book assessment may provide a more authentic evaluative alternative.

Data Sources and Participants

The empirical material for this study consists of two complementary qualitative sources. The first source is an autoethnographic corpus based on the researcher's documented reflections as a doctoral candidate during the 2025–2026 academic year. This corpus includes learning notes, reflective accounts, preparation experiences, classroom observations, assessment-related reflections, and narrative records of engagement with an advanced Discourse Analysis course. These reflections are used not as a private confession, but as critically examined educational data that illuminate the relationship between cognitive pressure, theoretical density, examination anxiety, reading practices, and assessment design.

The second source is a netnographic stakeholder corpus drawn from professional academic discussion following the public sharing of reflections on open-book examinations and doctoral assessment. This corpus includes responses from six academic stakeholders representing different positions within the Libyan higher education community. Their contributions were included with permission and are treated as professional academic reflections rather than

anonymous casual comments. The participants represent diverse disciplinary and institutional perspectives relevant to language studies, translation, applied linguistics, postgraduate education, and assessment practice.

The stakeholder participants are as follows:

Dr Kamal Al-Furgani is a specialist in Translation Studies and a linguistic researcher. His contribution is particularly significant because it frames the issue of open-book examinations in relation to the broader purpose of postgraduate education. He emphasises that master's and doctoral candidates are researchers of information and should therefore be assessed through methods that cultivate critical inquiry, autonomous reasoning, and original scholarly thought rather than mere memorisation.

Professor Al-Hussein Saleem Mohsen, Professor of Applied Linguistics and Translation, and Coordinator of Graduate Studies in the Department of English Language at Alasmariya Islamic University, Faculty of Arts, Zliten. His contribution provides institutional and historical depth to the discussion by noting that open-book examinations are not a weak or unfamiliar model, but have existed in rigorous academic settings, including demanding scientific fields. His perspective helps challenge the assumption that open-book assessment lowers academic standards.

Dr Sumaya Al-Najjar, Assistant Professor in the Department of Translation, Faculty of Arts, University of Tripoli. Her contribution draws on teaching experience and highlights the pedagogical value of open-book examinations in encouraging critical thinking, individual understanding, analytical engagement, and application of knowledge. She also notes that some students initially resist this assessment format because they are more accustomed to traditional examinations based on memorisation. Fatima Jihawi is an academic participant and graduate of the Department of English, Faculty of Arts, University of Tripoli. Her contribution reflects the perspective of an academically engaged graduate within the Libyan higher education context and provides insight into how assessment practices are perceived by learners and early-career academic participants who have experienced traditional models of university evaluation. Mohsen Hamli, Professor of Literature and former academic staff member in the Department of English at the Faculty of Arts, University of Tripoli, offers an academically significant position on open-book examinations in postgraduate education. His view is important because it does not treat open-book assessment as a relaxation of academic standards, but as a more appropriate response to the intellectual demands of advanced study.

Abdullah Andan, a researcher and a lecturer in the Department of English at the Faculty of Languages, Al Jufara University. His contribution is central to the disciplinary argument of the study because he explicitly connects the need for open-book assessment to the structural complexity of Discourse Analysis, particularly the overlap among models, frameworks, and technical terminology. His response supports the claim that the difficulty of Discourse Analysis is not merely the memorisation of concepts, but the ability to distinguish, select, and apply them appropriately. Together, these participants provided a diverse professional corpus through which the researcher's lived experience could be examined alongside wider academic perspectives. Their responses allowed the study to move beyond a purely individual account and to identify broader concerns within the Libyan higher education community regarding assessment validity, doctoral competence, examination anxiety, disciplinary complexity, and the future of scholarly reading in the age of generative AI.

Data Collection Procedures

Data collection occurred in two stages. The first stage involved the systematic documentation of the researcher's lived educational experiences while studying Discourse Analysis within the doctoral programme. Reflective accounts were recorded during the learning process and focused on preparation for analytical tasks, engagement with academic books and lecture materials, use of digital and AI-supported tools, experiences of cognitive overload, and perceptions of closed-book and open-book assessment formats. The second stage involved the collection of textual responses generated through naturally occurring academic discussion concerning open-book examinations, doctoral assessment, and postgraduate learning. The study did not rely on a structured questionnaire or formal interview schedule. Instead, it examined spontaneous written responses contributed by academics, lecturers, and postgraduate researchers in an authentic professional exchange. This approach was valuable because it allowed participants to articulate their views in their own terms, with their own priorities, concerns, and rhetorical emphases, rather than being restricted by predetermined categories.

Because the discussion emerged from a real professional academic context, the responses were treated as naturally occurring qualitative data. The researcher preserved the meaning of participants' contributions while integrating

them analytically into the study. Where direct quotations are used, they are presented as evidence of stakeholder perspectives and interpreted in relation to the research questions rather than treated as isolated opinions.

Data Analysis Procedures

The data were analysed thematically, drawing on the logic of qualitative thematic analysis. The analytical process involved repeated reading of the full corpus, initial coding of meaningful segments, identification of recurring patterns, refinement of themes, and interpretation of these themes in relation to the research questions and theoretical framework. Attention was given to moments where the autoethnographic account converged with, complicated, or was extended by stakeholder perspectives.

The analysis moved through several iterative stages. First, all autoethnographic reflections and stakeholder responses were read closely to gain familiarity with the dataset. Second, relevant segments were coded in relation to assessment practices, reading behaviour, cognitive pressure, examination anxiety, AI-assisted study strategies, perceptions of open-book assessment, and concerns about text difficulty. Third, related codes were grouped into broader thematic categories. Fourth, these categories were reviewed against the complete dataset to ensure that they reflected both the researcher's lived experience and the wider stakeholder discussion. Finally, the themes were interpreted in relation to the study's central concern: the pedagogical suitability of open-book examinations in doctoral Discourse Analysis education. The final thematic structure included the following themes: cognitive overload and epistemic density; examination anxiety and memory disruption; AI-mediated learning and shortcut culture; stakeholder support for research-oriented assessment; peer resistance and text-complexity anxiety; reclaiming the academic book as an active analytical tool; and the need for transparent design principles in open-book assessment. These themes structure the findings and discussion sections of the study.

Trustworthiness of the Study

To enhance the trustworthiness of the study, several qualitative quality measures were adopted. Credibility was strengthened through triangulation between two complementary data sources: the autoethnographic corpus and the netnographic stakeholder discourse. This allowed the study to compare the researcher's lived experience with the perspectives of academics, lecturers, and postgraduate researchers within the wider Libyan higher education context. Dependability was supported through a transparent account of the research context, data sources, data collection procedures, and analytical process. Confirmability was addressed through reflexive awareness of the researcher's insider position and through sustained attention to grounding interpretations in the collected data. Transferability was supported by providing rich contextual description, enabling readers to judge whether the findings may be relevant to comparable doctoral programmes, particularly those involving theory-intensive courses, assessment pressure, and digitally mediated learning environments.

The use of named participants also contributes to contextual authenticity, if consent has been obtained and ethically documented. Their professional identities strengthen the credibility of the stakeholder's corpus because each contribution is situated within a recognisable academic background. At the same time, the analysis does not rely on authority alone; participants' views are interpreted thematically in relation to the research questions and the wider pedagogical problem addressed by the study.

Alignment Between Research Questions and Themes

The following alignment table clarifies how the research questions correspond to the thematic structure of the findings and analysis.

Table 1. Thematic patterns from research questions

Research Question	Related Themes
RQ1	Cognitive overload, examination anxiety, and memory disruption
RQ2	AI-mediated learning; shortcut culture; scholarly reading
RQ3	Stakeholder support; institutional concerns; student resistance
RQ4	Authority of the book; deep reading; higher-order learning
RQ5	Text-complexity anxiety; rubric clarity; assessment design

Researcher Positionality

The researcher occupies an insider position as both a doctoral candidate and a participant within the educational environment examined in this study. This positionality provides privileged access to the lived realities of doctoral learning, including the pressures, uncertainties, and reflective processes that may not be easily visible to external observers. At the same time, it requires careful reflexive awareness throughout the research process.

Rather than treating researcher subjectivity as a weakness to be eliminated, this study recognises it as an integral element of qualitative inquiry. The researcher's experience is not presented as neutral or universally representative, but as a critically examined case through which broader pedagogical questions can be explored. Reflexive attention was maintained in order to distinguish between personal experience, analytical interpretation, and stakeholder perspectives, thereby ensuring that the findings remained grounded in the dataset rather than in unexamined personal assumptions.

Ethical Considerations

The study relies on reflective educational experience and voluntarily expressed academic opinions shared within a professional scholarly context. The named participants included in the study gave permission for their contributions to be used and were pleased to have their perspectives represented within the research. Their views are treated respectfully as professional academic contributions to a discussion concerning postgraduate assessment and doctoral learning.

All named stakeholder contributions were included with the participants' permission and are presented as professional academic reflections within the context of postgraduate assessment reform. Their views are interpreted analytically rather than used as personal testimony, and the study remains committed to accurate representation, contextual fairness, and respect for the contributors' academic positions.

Although the participants agreed to be named, the study remains attentive to ethical principles of academic integrity, informed consent, confidentiality where required, and respect for participant contributions. Direct quotations and paraphrased views are used solely for scholarly purposes and interpreted within the educational context in which they were originally produced. For journal submission, the researcher should retain evidence of consent and ensure that the final presentation of participant contributions remains accurate, fair, and free from reputational risk.

The study also recognises the ethical sensitivity of autoethnographic research. Since the researcher is both the author and a participant in the educational context under investigation, the analysis avoids exposing private classroom interactions unnecessarily. The purpose is not to evaluate individuals or institutions negatively, but to examine a pedagogical problem and contribute constructively to assessment reform in doctoral education.

Findings and Data Analysis

The analysis of the combined autoethnographic and netnographic data revealed a set of interrelated themes that illuminate how doctoral students and academic stakeholders experience, interpret, and evaluate assessment practices within doctoral Discourse Analysis education. Rather than presenting the findings as isolated categories, this section organises them as interconnected thematic patterns that reflect the complexity of learning in theory-intensive doctoral contexts. The themes also demonstrate how assessment design intersects with scholarly reading, cognitive pressure, AI-mediated learning strategies, perceptions of academic rigour, and the authority of the academic book.

The final thematic structure consists of six major themes: cognitive overload and the epistemic density of Discourse Analysis; examination anxiety and memory disruption; AI-mediated learning and the shortcut culture of closed-book preparation; stakeholder support for research-oriented assessment; peer resistance and text-complexity anxiety; and reclaiming the academic book as an active analytical tool.

Theme One: Cognitive Overload and the Epistemic Density of Discourse Analysis

The first major theme concerns the cognitive burden experienced by doctoral students when required to engage with several discourse-analytical frameworks simultaneously. Discourse Analysis is not a linear or single-theory field. It requires students to move between different traditions, each of which carries its own conceptual vocabulary, analytical logic, assumptions about language, and methodological procedures. Critical Discourse Analysis foregrounds ideology, power, hegemony, institutional dominance, and social practice. Systemic Functional Linguistics

foregrounds metafunctions, transitivity, modality, theme, grammar, and meaning potential. Pragmatics and Conversation Analysis direct attention to speech acts, implicature, adjacency pairs, turn-taking, repair, sequencing, and interactional organisation. Multimodal approaches extend the scope of analysis to visual grammar, semiotic resources, gaze, salience, framing, spatial composition, and the interaction between verbal and non-verbal modes.

The density of the field is therefore not merely terminological; it is conceptual, methodological, and epistemological. The data suggest that doctoral students may understand individual theories during lectures, but lose confidence when required to retrieve, distinguish, and apply an entire network of theoretical frameworks under closed-book conditions. This distinction is important. The problem is not the absence of learning, but the pressure of reproducing a dense and overlapping theoretical map without access to the resources that would normally support scholarly analysis.

The autoethnographic record captures this cognitive burden clearly. Reflecting on preparation for an advanced Discourse Analysis assignment, the researcher writes:

"We have a course this semester called Discourse Analysis. The material is incredibly dense and heavy, requiring a high level of textual analysis across multiple theories. The professor gave us what appeared to be a simple assignment: analysing a conversation between a student and a lecturer. I spread out my textbooks, lecture notes, and sheets, and said to myself: 'Let's go, Manar, trust in God. You can do it'"

This reflection is important because it reveals the lived reality behind what may appear administratively as an ordinary assignment. The task is not approached passively or carelessly. On the contrary, the student mobilises textbooks, lecture notes, sheets, summaries, digital tools, and personal effort in order to produce a serious analysis. The cognitive overload emerges precisely because the task is intellectually demanding and because the student is attempting to do justice to the theoretical complexity of the field.

The finding, therefore, suggests that closed-book assessment may transform theory from a set of analytical tools into a memory burden. Instead of encouraging students to use concepts critically, the assessment situation may compel them to treat theories as items to be retained, compressed, and reproduced. In a doctoral Discourse Analysis course, this shift is pedagogically problematic because the value of the discipline lies not in the memorisation of terminology, but in the ability to mobilise theoretical knowledge in relation to actual discourse data.

Theme Two: Examination Anxiety, Memory Disruption, and the Limits of Closed-Book Validity

The second theme concerns the emotional and psychological effects of closed-book assessment. The autoethnographic data indicate that high-stakes assessment can produce anxiety, memory disruption, and a temporary disconnection between what the student has actually understood and what the student can retrieve under pressure. This finding complicates the assumption that closed-book examinations directly measure understanding.

The researcher describes a moment in which, after investing several hours in producing a discourse analysis assignment, she later looked at the printed work and experienced a sense of unfamiliarity:

"Here is the real problem: on the day I printed out the assignment to hand it in to the professor, I looked at the paper in front of me and thought: 'What is this? Who wrote this? When did this happen?' I felt as though I was seeing the assignment for the first time, despite the fact that I had spent nearly six hours working on it."

This reflection is not simply a personal anecdote. It provides insight into the relationship between anxiety, memory, and academic performance. The student had engaged deeply with the task, but evaluative pressure appeared to interrupt her access to her own work. Such moments raise questions about the validity of assessment formats that rely heavily on memory retrieval under pressure. In doctoral education, research competence cannot be reduced to the ability to recall theoretical information in an artificial evaluative situation. A student may be capable of sophisticated interpretation but still experience cognitive blockage when the assessment environment is framed primarily as a memory performance.

A second metaphor in the data intensifies this point. The researcher notes that, during a later classroom experience, analysing text under pressure felt like "defusing live explosives". This metaphor captures the heightened intensity produced when dense theory, limited time, evaluative pressure, and fear of error converge. It also suggests that examination anxiety is not a marginal emotional issue, but a structural feature of the assessment regime. The difficulty is not merely psychological; it is produced by a mismatch between the nature of the task and the conditions under which the task is evaluated.

From this perspective, closed-book examinations may measure several things at once: theoretical retention, speed of recall, emotional regulation, confidence, and resilience under pressure. However, they may not reliably distinguish between a student who does not understand the material and a student whose understanding becomes inaccessible under examination stress. This distinction is particularly important at the doctoral level, where the central competence should be analytical judgement rather than performative memory.

Theme Three: AI-Mediated Learning and the Shortcut Culture of Closed-Book Preparation

The third theme concerns the role of artificial intelligence and digital tools in shaping doctoral study strategies. The autoethnographic data openly acknowledge the use of tools such as ChatGPT and Gemini as part of the preparation process. Rather than treating this as a hidden or exceptional practice, the study interprets it as evidence of the contemporary learning environment in which doctoral students now work. AI tools are increasingly used to summarise theoretical content, clarify terminology, organise ideas, compare perspectives, and test preliminary interpretations.

The researcher describes the intensity of this process in a humorous but analytically revealing way:

"I read, compared, summarised, rewrote, and reorganised my ideas for nearly six hours. I even used ChatGPT and Gemini—leaving out only the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), as if I had mobilised every possible force except a military alliance."

The humorous reference to NATO should not be read as a trivial aside. It functions as a rhetorical marker of intellectual exhaustion and reveals the scale of resources mobilised to manage a single analytical task. The comment also suggests that AI is not simply an external threat to academic integrity; it is also a symptom of assessment pressure, theoretical density, and the need for conceptual compression. When students face dense reading lists and closed-book assessments, they may turn to AI because they need condensed, manageable, and quickly retrievable representations of knowledge.

This finding does not support a moralistic rejection of AI. Rather, it points to a more pedagogically useful interpretation: AI-mediated learning is partly shaped by assessment design. If assessment rewards the reproduction of memorised information, students are likely to seek tools that help them compress and memorise faster. If assessment rewards interpretation, comparison, contextual reasoning, and theoretical justification, students must move beyond AI-generated summaries and demonstrate their own analytical judgement.

Open-book examinations can help address this issue because they reduce the incentive to memorise AI-generated simplifications. If students know they will be allowed to consult authorised books, notes, and theoretical resources during the examination, preparation may shift from compressing information into short memory units towards organising sources, annotating texts, understanding conceptual relationships, and practising analytical application. In this model, the book becomes useful again, not because it contains a ready-made answer, but because it supports interpretive reasoning.

Theme Four: Stakeholder Support for Research-Oriented Assessment

The netnographic stakeholder corpus reveals strong support among several Libyan academic participants for assessment reform at the postgraduate level. Their responses extend the researcher's lived experience into a wider professional debate about the purpose of doctoral education, the nature of scholarly competence, and the limitations of memory-based assessment.

Dr Kamal Al-Furgani, a specialist in Translation Studies and a linguistic researcher, offers a particularly important perspective because he shifts the discussion from the immediate difficulty of Discourse Analysis to the broader purpose of postgraduate education itself. His position emphasises that a master's or doctoral candidate is fundamentally a researcher in formation. Therefore, assessment should not train students merely to reproduce information under pressure, but to think independently, question critically, construct arguments, and engage creatively with knowledge.

"He affirms the value of the open-book model, arguing that assessment methods centred on memorisation undermine genuine research competence. He emphasises that a doctoral candidate is fundamentally a researcher who must be trained in critical inquiry, autonomous reasoning, and intellectual creativity."

According to Furgani, the persistent reliance on traditional examinations has no justified role in postgraduate education, whether at the master's or doctoral level, where the primary focus should be the cultivation of critical thinking and rigorous scientific research.

According to this view, the continued reliance on traditional closed-book examinations at the postgraduate level lacks a strong pedagogical justification when such examinations fail to cultivate the qualities that define emerging researchers. These qualities include analytical judgement, methodological awareness, critical inquiry, intellectual autonomy, and the ability to produce original scholarly thought. Dr Al-Furgani's contribution, therefore, supports the central argument of the present study: if doctoral students are being prepared as researchers, assessment should resemble the intellectual practices of research itself. Researchers do not work in isolation from books, theories, references, and scholarly debates. They consult, compare, question, interpret, and synthesise. From this perspective, open-book assessment is not a relaxation of standards, but a more authentic and intellectually demanding format.

A second significant contribution came from Abdullah Andan, a lecturer of English at the Faculty of Languages, Al-Jufara University and researcher in Applied Linguistics. His response directly connects the need for open-book assessment to the structural complexity of Discourse Analysis. He observes:

"Discourse Analysis is an exceptionally dense and demanding subject. Its difficulty does not lie only in the act of analysing texts, but also in the close overlap among models, frameworks, and structural terminology. Many technical terms are highly similar, interconnected, and sometimes difficult to distinguish across different theoretical traditions"

This quotation provides direct support for the argument that closed-book examinations may be misaligned with the discipline. If the core challenge is distinguishing, selecting, and applying overlapping frameworks, then assessment should not primarily test whether students can memorise terms in isolation. Rather, it should evaluate whether they can consult sources, identify relevant concepts, justify theoretical choices, and apply them appropriately to discourse data. Abdullah Andan's contribution is therefore not merely supportive; it strengthens the disciplinary basis of the argument by showing that open-book assessment responds to the epistemological structure of Discourse Analysis itself.

Professor Al-Hussein Saleem Mohsen, Professor of Linguistics and Translation and Coordinator of Graduate Studies in the Department of English Language at Alasmariya Islamic University, Zliten, provides an important historical and institutional perspective. He notes that open-book examinations are not a weak or foreign innovation, but have existed in rigorous academic environments, including demanding scientific fields. Referring to his experience as a student in the Faculty of Nuclear and Electronic Engineering at the University of Tripoli during the 1980s, he states:

"I firmly believe that postgraduate education should rely primarily on research projects across all courses. The concept of an open-book examination is well-established in top international universities. In fact, when I was a student in the Faculty of Nuclear and Electronic Engineering at the University of Tripoli during the 1980s, we took open-book examinations on multiple occasions." Really, they were a real challenge as the students were suffering a lot to obtain correct answers for the questions. Recently, I tried this kind of exams with my MA students at the School of Languages, The Libyan Academy for Graduate Studies. The students admired the experience and said that they felt free not being bound to only one book as they had a variety of books and resources to answer the exam."

He further explains that these examinations were genuinely challenging, as students still struggled to locate correct answers and use resources effectively. He also reports that, when he later experimented with this format with MA students at the School of Languages at the Libyan Academy for Graduate Studies, the students valued the experience because they felt less restricted by reliance on a single source and more able to draw on a range of books and resources. This contribution is important because it challenges two misconceptions at once: first, that open-book assessment is new to the Libyan context; and second, that it necessarily reduces academic rigour.

Dr Sumaya Al-Najjar, Assistant Professor in the Department of Translation, Faculty of Arts, University of Tripoli, contributes a pedagogical perspective grounded in teaching experience. Reflecting on her use of open-book examinations in courses such as History of Translation and Translation Theories, she states:

"Open-book examinations are among the most effective assessment methods because they provide students with the opportunity to think critically, analyze information, and demonstrate their individual understanding rather than merely memorizing and reproducing content. In my experience, this approach encourages deeper engagement with the subject matter and allows students to apply knowledge in a more meaningful way." She further noted that despite these educational benefits, some students initially resist open-book assessments because they are more accustomed to

traditional examinations that primarily reward memorization. Open-book exams, by contrast, require higher-order cognitive skills such as analysis, evaluation, and the application of knowledge, which can present a greater challenge for students who are unfamiliar with this mode of assessment."

Her contribution is significant because it connects open-book assessment to individual understanding, critical thinking, and applied knowledge. She also notes that some students initially resist open-book examinations because they are accustomed to traditional formats that reward memorisation. This observation helps explain why resistance to open-book assessment may come not only from institutional systems, but also from learners who have internalised older assessment cultures.

The remaining stakeholder contributions, including those of Fatima Jihawi, further support the importance of examining assessment reform from within the Libyan academic context. Their perspectives contribute to the wider pattern emerging from the stakeholder corpus: postgraduate assessment should be more closely aligned with research-oriented learning, critical engagement, and the actual intellectual practices expected of advanced students.

In support of the present study's argument, Professor Mohsen Hamli, Professor of Literature and former academic staff member in the Department of English at the Faculty of Arts, University of Tripoli, offers an academically significant position on open-book examinations in postgraduate education. His view is important because it does not treat open-book assessment as a relaxation of academic standards, but as a more appropriate response to the intellectual demands of advanced study. It also supports one of the central concerns of this study: the need to restore the academic value of the book in an age increasingly shaped by digital shortcuts, instant access to information, summaries, and AI-assisted learning.

Professor Hamli states:

"Open-book examinations at the Master's and PhD levels reflect a modern approach to assessment that values critical thinking, analysis, and the application of knowledge rather than raw memorisation alone. Academic staff should have the freedom to diversify assessment methods according to the learning outcomes of their programmes."

Designing and grading such examinations often requires greater effort from instructors, as questions must evaluate interpretation, synthesis, and independent reasoning. In an age of globalisation and instant access to information, postgraduate education should focus on developing scholars who can analyse, evaluate, and generate knowledge, not simply recall it. Well-designed open-book assessments are therefore both academically rigorous and aligned with contemporary international standards in higher education."

This statement reinforces the argument that the open-book examination should not be misunderstood as an easier form of assessment. On the contrary, it demands a more sophisticated relationship between the student, the text, and the examined knowledge. In traditional closed-book examinations, the book is often displaced before the examination begins: it becomes a source to be memorised in advance and then abandoned at the moment of assessment. By contrast, the open-book examination restores the book to the centre of academic practice. It allows the book to function as an active scholarly companion through which the student consults, compares, interprets, selects, questions, and applies knowledge.

Professor Hamli's emphasis on "critical thinking, analysis, and the application of knowledge" is especially relevant to doctoral education and to theory-intensive disciplines such as Discourse Analysis. In such fields, knowledge cannot be reduced to the memorisation of terminology or the reproduction of theoretical definitions. The doctoral student is expected to demonstrate the ability to move critically between theory and text, between linguistic evidence and social context, and between conceptual frameworks and independent interpretation. Therefore, an assessment model that permits access to books, notes, and scholarly sources can more accurately evaluate the higher-order intellectual abilities required at this level.

His observation that designing and grading open-book examinations requires greater effort from instructors is also pedagogically important. It confirms that the quality of an open-book examination depends on the intellectual design of its questions. Such examinations must be constructed in a way that prevents superficial copying and instead requires interpretation, synthesis, evaluation, and independent reasoning. This makes the open-book examination not a permissive alternative, but a rigorous academic practice that places greater responsibility on both the instructor and the student.

Within the context of this study, Professor Hamli's view provides expert support for the claim that open-book examinations are particularly suitable for postgraduate education in the contemporary knowledge environment. In a

world where information is instantly available, the central educational question is no longer whether students can merely recall information, but whether they can use it critically, ethically, and creatively. From this perspective, the open-book examination redefines the book as a living instrument of inquiry rather than a static object of memorisation. It also aligns assessment with the genuine aims of doctoral education: the formation of researchers capable of analysing, evaluating, producing, and transforming knowledge.

To conclude, Fatima Jihawi's contribution reflects the perspective of an academically engaged graduate who supports open-book examinations not only at the postgraduate level but also in undergraduate education. She views this mode of assessment as important because it encourages students to understand academic material, engage with it critically, and develop independent interpretations rather than relying primarily on memorised performance. Her perspective adds a valuable learner-centred dimension to the findings, as it shows how traditional assessment practices are perceived by those whose academic formation has been directly shaped by them. As a graduate of the Department of English, Faculty of Arts, University of Tripoli, Jihawi's view strengthens the argument that assessment in Libyan higher education should move beyond memorisation and promote deeper engagement with texts, critical thinking, and independent reasoning.

Theme Five: Peer Resistance and Text-Complexity Anxiety

One of the most original findings of the study is the emergence of what may be termed text-complexity anxiety. When the researcher proposed the possibility of an open-book examination, some peers did not respond with immediate support. Instead, their reactions revealed hesitation, discomfort, and concern. Some imagined that the examination hall would become noisy, with students turning pages anxiously and wasting valuable time searching through books. Others worried that requesting an open-book format might appear childish, academically weak, or inappropriate for doctoral students.

The autoethnographic record captures this reaction as follows:

"Some classmates did not welcome the idea. Their first concern was practical: they imagined the examination hall filled with the sound of pages turning, students searching nervously through books, and precious exam time being wasted on flipping through materials rather than writing answers."

This response reveals that open-book assessment is not automatically perceived as liberating. In some assessment cultures, the closed book symbolises seriousness, maturity, and intellectual strength, while the open book is wrongly associated with dependency, weakness, or lack of preparation. The researcher explicitly challenges this assumption:

"The proposal was not a confession of weakness; it was a pedagogical suggestion."

The deeper concern, however, was not merely logistical. Some students feared that if books were allowed, the instructor would compensate by selecting an exceptionally difficult, obscure, or unmanageable text. In this imagination, access to resources becomes a warning sign rather than a form of support. The open book does not reduce anxiety; it signals that the examination may become more punitive. This is what the study identifies as text-complexity anxiety: the fear that access to resources will be pedagogically punished through excessive text difficulty. This finding has practical significance for assessment reform. It suggests that students may prefer the familiar discomfort of memorisation to the uncertain demands of open-book analysis if they do not trust the design of the assessment. Therefore, the successful implementation of open-book examinations requires transparency, clear rubrics, fair text selection, explicit criteria, and prior training in how to prepare for and manage open-book assessments. Without such conditions, open-book examinations may reproduce anxiety rather than reduce it.

Theme Six: Reclaiming the Academic Book as an Active Analytical Tool

Across the data, the strongest pedagogical argument for open-book assessment concerns the restoration of the academic book as an active tool of thought. Under closed-book preparation, students may treat books as sources to be summarised, compressed, and then abandoned before entering the examination room. In open-book preparation, by contrast, books remain present throughout the learning process. Students are encouraged to organise them, annotate key sections, compare theoretical distinctions, trace arguments, and learn where and how to locate concepts.

This process is itself a form of scholarly training. The authority of the book is not restored by forcing students to memorise it. Rather, it is restored by requiring them to work with it responsibly. The doctoral student should enter the examination not as a container of memorised fragments, but as a researcher equipped with sources and expected

to produce an analysis. In this sense, open-book assessment can reconstruct the relationship between student and text. The book becomes neither a hidden answer sheet nor a symbolic object of academic seriousness; it becomes a working intellectual companion.

This theme directly supports the central claim of the study. Open-book examinations can restore the authority of the academic book precisely because they make books usable, necessary, and intellectually active within the assessment process. The student's success no longer depends on whether definitions have been temporarily stored in memory, but on whether theoretical sources can be mobilised to construct a coherent, contextualised, and defensible analysis.

Summary of Findings

Taken together, the findings reveal a persistent pedagogical tension between three forces: the theoretical density of Discourse Analysis, the constraints of conventional closed-book assessment, and the growing influence of AI-assisted learning tools. Within this tension, doctoral students navigate competing demands: memorising theory, interpreting discourse, managing anxiety, engaging with books, and using digital resources efficiently.

The data suggest that current assessment practices may not fully resolve this tension. Instead, closed-book examinations may intensify it by reinforcing memory-centred preparation while operating within an academic environment increasingly shaped by digital mediation and AI-supported learning. By contrast, open-book assessment, if carefully designed, may offer a more valid and research-oriented alternative. It can support deep reading, reduce destructive anxiety, discourage superficial shortcut learning, and evaluate the higher-order analytical competences required in doctoral Discourse Analysis education.

Discussion: Interpreting the Findings and Answering the Research Questions

The findings of this study highlight a complex interaction between assessment design, cognitive processes, scholarly reading practices, and emerging digital learning environments within doctoral Discourse Analysis education. Rather than functioning as isolated outcomes, the identified themes collectively point towards a deeper structural tension in contemporary higher education: the misalignment between the epistemological nature of advanced linguistic study and the evaluative mechanisms traditionally used to assess it. In particular, the findings suggest that closed-book examinations may intensify memorisation-oriented preparation, examination anxiety, and reliance on condensed digital resources, while open-book examinations, when carefully designed, may offer a more authentic and research-oriented alternative.

This discussion interprets the findings in relation to the study's research questions. It argues that the value of open-book assessment lies not in making doctoral examinations easier, but in making them more valid, more intellectually demanding, and more closely aligned with the actual practices of scholarly research.

RQ1: Closed-Book Examinations, Reading Practices, and Psychological Experience

The first research question asked how traditional closed-book examinations influence the reading practices, study strategies, cognitive experiences, and psychological well-being of doctoral students in Discourse Analysis courses. The findings indicate that closed-book assessment redirects learning towards memorisation, compression, and performance under pressure. In a theory-intensive course such as Discourse Analysis, this redirection is pedagogically costly because students are required to manage multiple frameworks, overlapping concepts, and complex methodological procedures. When examination success depends heavily on recall, students may devote considerable cognitive energy to retaining terminology rather than developing analytical confidence.

This finding aligns with the constructivist orientation of the study. Meaningful doctoral learning requires active processing, interpretation, and conceptual construction. However, when assessment systems emphasise rapid recall under time constraints, cognitive resources may be redirected away from meaning-making and towards short-term memory performance. The result is a narrowing of the intellectual space needed for deep interpretive engagement with theoretical material.

The autoethnographic data further show that examination anxiety cannot be reduced to an individual psychological weakness. Rather, it should be understood as a structurally produced condition embedded within particular assessment regimes. The researcher's experience of memory disruption after having engaged deeply with an analytical task demonstrates that closed-book examinations may not reliably distinguish between lack of

understanding and difficulty retrieving knowledge under stress. At the doctoral level, this distinction is crucial. A candidate may be capable of sophisticated analysis yet experience cognitive blockage when required to reproduce a dense theoretical map without access to the resources that normally support scholarly work.

Accordingly, the answer to RQ1 is that traditional closed-book examinations in this context tend to intensify cognitive overload, promote memory-centred preparation, and risk misrepresenting doctoral analytical competence. At the level of reading practices, they may encourage strategic summarisation rather than sustained engagement with primary texts. At the psychological level, they may produce exam phobia, cognitive disorientation, and a sense of alienation from one's own work.

RQ2: Digital Resources, AI Tools, and Examination Preparation

The second research question asked how contemporary digital resources and AI-assisted learning tools shape doctoral students' approaches to examination preparation and engagement with academic texts. The findings show that AI-supported tools are increasingly integrated into doctoral learning practices, particularly for summarising theories, clarifying concepts, organising ideas, and simplifying complex academic material. These tools are not inherently harmful. They may support comprehension, accessibility, and productivity when used critically. However, under memory-heavy assessment conditions, they can also encourage shortcut learning.

The data suggest that AI use should not be interpreted in purely moralistic terms. Rather than viewing AI as an external threat to academic integrity alone, the study shows that AI-mediated preparation is partly a response to assessment design. When students face dense theoretical material and know that assessment will reward recall, they may seek condensed outputs that can be memorised quickly. In such circumstances, AI becomes a tool for compression rather than a tool for critical inquiry. This does not mean that students are unwilling to read; it means that assessment pressure may push them towards the most efficient route to examination survival.

This finding contributes to current debates on AI in higher education by shifting attention from prohibition to assessment redesign. If assessment continues to reward the reproduction of information, students will continue to use digital tools to reproduce information more efficiently. If, however, assessment rewards interpretation, contextual reasoning, theoretical justification, and critical verification, students must go beyond AI-generated summaries and demonstrate their own scholarly judgement.

Open-book examinations can contribute to this shift by making authorised academic sources central to examination preparation. When students know that they may consult books, notes, and selected resources, preparation can move from memorising compressed summaries towards organising sources, annotating arguments, constructing theory maps, and practising application. In this sense, open-book assessment may reduce unhealthy dependence on AI shortcuts by restoring the functional importance of primary academic texts.

RQ3: Stakeholder Perspectives on Open-Book Examinations

The third research question asked what perspectives Libyan academics, university lecturers, and postgraduate researchers hold regarding the potential advantages, challenges, and conditions of open-book examinations in doctoral education. The stakeholder responses reveal substantial support for open-book examinations at the postgraduate level, particularly when assessment is understood as a means of cultivating research competence rather than memory performance.

Dr Kamal Al-Furgani's contribution is especially significant because it reframes the issue in relation to the identity of the postgraduate student as a researcher in formation. From this perspective, assessment should train students to question, compare, argue, interpret, and produce knowledge, rather than merely reproduce information under pressure. This view strongly supports the central claim of the study: doctoral assessment should resemble the intellectual practices of research itself.

Abdullah Andan's contribution further strengthens the disciplinary argument by linking open-book assessment to the structural complexity of Discourse Analysis. His emphasis on overlapping models, frameworks, and technical terminology shows that the difficulty of the course lies not simply in remembering definitions, but in distinguishing and applying concepts across different theoretical traditions. This supports the argument that assessment should evaluate theoretical selection, justification, and application rather than isolated recall.

Professor Al-Hussein Salim Mohsen's perspective adds historical and institutional depth. His reference to open-book examinations in rigorous scientific fields at the University of Tripoli during the 1980s challenges the assumption that open-book assessment is new, foreign, or academically weak. It also demonstrates that open-book examinations can be intellectually demanding when questions require reasoning and application rather than simple information retrieval.

Dr Sumaya Al-Najjar's teaching-based perspective confirms the pedagogical value of open-book assessment in encouraging critical thinking, individual understanding, and meaningful application of knowledge. Her observation that some students initially resist this format is also important because it shows that assessment reform must address not only institutional policy, but also learner expectations shaped by long-standing traditions of memorisation.

Professor Mohsen Hamli's statement indicates that open-book examinations at the master's and doctoral levels represent a modern assessment approach because they evaluate critical thinking, analysis, and the application of knowledge rather than mere memorisation. He also emphasises that such examinations do not reduce academic rigour; rather, they require greater effort in designing and grading questions that assess interpretation, synthesis, and independent reasoning. This view supports the study's argument that open-book examinations restore the value of the book as an instrument of thinking, inquiry, and analysis, rather than treating it as a source of memorisation and reproduction.

Finally, Fatima Jihawi's contribution reflects the view of an academically engaged graduate who sees open-book examinations as a more meaningful alternative to memorisation-based assessment, particularly because they encourage understanding, critical engagement, and independent interpretation.

At the same time, the findings show that stakeholder support does not automatically guarantee successful implementation. Students may fear that open-book examinations will be unpredictable, noisy, excessively difficult, or punitive. Therefore, the adoption of open-book assessment must be accompanied by careful design, clear explanation, explicit criteria, and trust-building between instructors and students.

RQ4: Restoring the Authority of the Academic Book and Supporting Higher-Order Learning

The fourth research question asked to what extent open-book examinations can restore the authority of the academic book and support deeper engagement with scholarly literature, higher-order analytical thinking, and research-oriented learning. The findings suggest that open-book assessment can restore the authority of the book by changing the way students prepare for assessment. Under closed-book conditions, books may be treated as sources to be summarised, compressed, and abandoned before the examination. Under open-book conditions, however, books remain active throughout the learning and assessment process.

This shift is central to the argument of the study. The authority of the book is not restored by forcing students to memorise it. Rather, it is restored when students are required to use books responsibly as tools for interpretation, comparison, verification, and argument construction. In an open-book examination, the book is not a hidden answer sheet. It is an intellectual resource that must be navigated critically and selectively.

This finding also connects directly to Bloom's taxonomy and the study's constructivist framework. Open-book assessment shifts emphasis from recall to application, from reproduction to interpretation, and from isolated knowledge to argued analysis. In Discourse Analysis, this shift is particularly important because students must analyse language in relation to context, ideology, interaction, power, social meaning, and textual evidence. Access to books does not perform this work for the student. Rather, it enables the student to engage in the kind of work that discourse analysts undertake.

Open-book examinations can therefore support higher-order learning when they require students to select appropriate frameworks, justify theoretical choices, interpret linguistic or semiotic features, compare possible readings, and construct coherent arguments. The findings indicate that this model is more closely aligned with doctoral-level competence than an examination format that overvalues short-term retention.

RQ5: Design Principles for Rigorous Open-Book Assessment

The fifth research question asked what assessment design principles are required to implement academically rigorous open-book examinations within doctoral Discourse Analysis education while maintaining fairness, clarity, academic

integrity, and authentic research-based evaluation. The findings show that open-book assessment is not a simple administrative adjustment. It requires a rethinking of the assessment ecology.

Five design principles emerge from the data. First, open-book examinations must test analytical application rather than information location. Questions should require students to interpret a text, justify theoretical choices, and construct an argument rather than merely find definitions in a book. Second, permitted resources must be clearly defined. Students should know whether they may use textbooks, lecture notes, annotated readings, dictionaries, printed sources, or digital materials. Third, selected texts must be challenging but not punitive. Complexity should arise from authentic discourse features and contextual richness, not from deliberate obscurity or excessive difficulty. Fourth, marking rubrics must be transparent and aligned with doctoral-level learning outcomes. Students should understand how theoretical accuracy, textual evidence, contextual sensitivity, critical judgement, and argument coherence will be evaluated. Fifth, students must be trained in how to prepare for open-book examinations, including how to annotate books, construct conceptual maps, organise sources, and manage examination time.

These principles respond directly to the phenomenon of text-complexity anxiety identified in the findings. Students may resist open-book assessment not because they reject analysis, but because they fear that access to resources will be punished by the selection of an unmanageable text. Transparent design can reduce this fear without weakening academic rigour. Indeed, clarity strengthens validity because it ensures that students are assessed on analytical competence rather than fear management.

Text-Complexity Anxiety and Trust in Assessment Design

One of the most original interpretive contributions of this study is the identification of text-complexity anxiety. This phenomenon refers to the fear that open-book examinations will be made excessively difficult precisely because students are allowed access to resources. It reflects not a rejection of open-book assessment itself, but a lack of confidence in how such assessment might be operationalised.

This finding is important because it shifts the discussion from format to trust. Students may not oppose open-book examinations because they prefer memorisation. Rather, they may worry that the assessment relationship is adversarial: if the book is allowed, the text must become impossible; if resources are permitted, the marking must become harsher. Such perceptions reveal the affective dimension of assessment reform. Changing the format of an examination is not enough. Institutions and instructors must also communicate the purpose, structure, standards, and limits of the assessment clearly.

For doctoral Discourse Analysis education, this means that open-book examinations should be designed around transparent expectations. Students do not necessarily need to know the exact text in advance, but they should understand the genre range, approximate level of difficulty, permitted resources, analytical requirements, and marking criteria. Such transparency does not reduce academic challenge. It makes educationally challenging rather than psychologically punitive.

Towards a Rebalanced Assessment Ecology

Taken together, the findings suggest the need for a rebalanced assessment ecology in doctoral education. Such an ecology would recognise that doctoral competence is not limited to memorisation, nor even to isolated analytical performance. It involves the ability to navigate complex information environments, engage critically with theoretical frameworks, use academic books responsibly, evaluate digital resources, and produce independent scholarly interpretations.

Within this rebalanced ecology, open-book examinations emerge not as a simplified alternative to traditional assessment, but as a potentially more authentic mechanism for evaluating the intellectual practices expected of doctoral researchers in contemporary academia. They can support deep reading, reduce destructive examination anxiety, discourage superficial AI-mediated learning, and align assessment more closely with research practice. Their value depends, however, on careful design, explicit ethical boundaries, and institutional recognition that academic rigour is not synonymous with memory deprivation.

The discussion therefore, confirms the central argument of the study: in doctoral Discourse Analysis education, especially within an AI-mediated learning environment, assessment should move beyond the question of what students can remember in isolation. It should ask what they can do with knowledge when texts, theories, and

scholarly resources are available. This shift does not weaken academic standards; it relocates rigour where it belongs—within interpretation, justification, evidence, and independent scholarly judgement.

A Contextual Model for Open-Book Examination Design in Doctoral Discourse Analysis

Based on the findings and discussion, this study proposes a contextual model for designing open-book examinations in doctoral Discourse Analysis education. The model is built around the principle of constructive alignment: assessment tasks should correspond directly with the learning outcomes, disciplinary nature, permitted resources, and marking criteria of the course. In this context, open-book examination design should not be treated as a mere procedural change in which students are allowed to bring books into the examination room. Rather, it should be understood as a pedagogical reconfiguration of assessment, designed to evaluate doctoral-level analytical competence, research-oriented judgement, and responsible engagement with scholarly sources.

The proposed model responds to three central problems identified in the data: the cognitive overload produced by theory-intensive learning, the limitations of memory-based closed-book assessment, and students' fear that open-book examinations may become punitive through excessive text complexity. It therefore aims to preserve academic rigour while reducing destructive anxiety and strengthening the relationship between students, theoretical texts, and authentic discourse analysis.

Principles Underlying the Model

The first principle is assessment alignment. In doctoral Discourse Analysis education, assessment should evaluate what the discipline actually requires: theoretical selection, contextual interpretation, textual evidence, critical judgement, and coherent argumentation. An open-book examination should therefore avoid questions that merely ask students to define concepts or reproduce theoretical descriptions. Instead, it should require students to use theories in relation to a specific text, context, or discourse problem.

The second principle is resource transparency. Students must know in advance which resources are permitted. These may include core textbooks, lecture notes, annotated readings, printed theoretical frameworks, dictionaries, or selected course materials. The purpose of such transparency is not to simplify the examination, but to ensure that all students prepare under fair and comparable conditions. Clear resource boundaries also help prevent confusion regarding academic integrity and the acceptable use of AI-supported tools.

The third principle is textual fairness. The selected examination text should be intellectually challenging but not deliberately obscure or punitive. In Discourse Analysis, complexity should arise from authentic features of discourse: ideological positioning, institutional context, interactional structure, rhetorical framing, modality, agency, representation, or multimodal meaning. It should not arise from unnecessary linguistic opacity, excessive length, or deliberately inaccessible subject matter. This principle directly addresses the text-complexity anxiety identified in the findings.

The fourth principle is analytical responsibility. Access to books does not remove the student's responsibility to think. On the contrary, it increases the demand for independent judgment. The student must decide which theoretical framework is most appropriate, justify why it is relevant, apply it accurately, and acknowledge the limitations of the chosen approach. The book is therefore not a substitute for analysis; it is a scholarly resource that must be mobilised critically.

The fifth principle is rubric clarity. A rigorous open-book examination requires transparent marking criteria. Students should understand how their work will be evaluated in terms of theoretical accuracy, analytical relevance, contextual sensitivity, use of textual evidence, critical judgement, source use, and coherence of argument. Rubric clarity reduces unnecessary anxiety and allows students to focus on the quality of their analysis rather than guessing what the examiner expects.

Proposed Assessment Alignment Model

The following model translates these principles into a practical framework for open-book examination design in doctoral Discourse Analysis. This model shows that open-book assessment is not a relaxation of academic expectations. Rather, it shifts the basis of rigour from remembering information to using knowledge responsibly. The

student is assessed not on the possession of sources, but on the ability to transform those sources into a coherent, contextualised, and theoretically justified analysis.

Table 2. Thematic Dimensions of Assessment Design in Doctoral Education

Assessment Dimension	Risk in Closed-Book Assessment	Open-Book Design Response	Expected Doctoral Competence
Knowledge of theory	Terminology may be memorised without flexible use.	Allow access to core texts and require theory selection, comparison, and justification.	Conceptual precision and theoretical judgement.
Textual analysis	Students may reproduce models rather than analyse discourse data.	Provide an unseen or semi-seen text with analytical prompts requiring application.	Ability to apply frameworks to authentic discourse.
Reading practices	Books may be reduced to summaries before the examination.	Require annotated books, conceptual maps, and source-based reasoning.	Deep reading and scholarly navigation.
AI use	Students may rely on compressed AI-generated explanations for recall.	Clarify AI boundaries and require human interpretive justification.	Critical verification and independent argument.
Anxiety and fairness	Performance may depend heavily on memory under pressure.	Use transparent rubrics, sample tasks, and balanced text difficulty.	Analytical confidence and trust in assessment.
Academic integrity	Access to resources may be misunderstood as permission to copy.	Define permitted resources and penalise mechanical reproduction.	Responsible and ethical use of sources.
Research authenticity	The examination may not resemble actual scholarly work.	Design tasks that require consultation, comparison, interpretation, and argumentation.	Research-oriented analytical competence.

Suggested Open-Book Examination Structure

A rigorous doctoral-level open-book examination in Discourse Analysis may be organised into three integrated sections. The first section may require theoretical selection and justification. Students are given a discourse text and asked to identify one or two suitable analytical frameworks. They must explain why these frameworks are relevant to the text, what aspects of discourse they illuminate, and what limitations they may have. This section evaluates theoretical awareness, conceptual precision, and the ability to make informed methodological decisions. The second section may require close textual analysis. Students analyse selected linguistic, discursive, interactional, or multimodal features of the text. Depending on the course focus, this may include modality, agency, transitivity, lexical choice, speech acts, implicature, turn-taking, framing, intertextuality, representation, visual salience, or ideological positioning. Students must support their claims with specific textual evidence. This section evaluates analytical application rather than theoretical recall.

The third section may require critical reflection and alternative interpretation. Students are asked to reflect on the strengths and limitations of their chosen framework and to consider how another approach might produce a different reading of the same text. This section encourages epistemological awareness and prevents mechanical application of theory. It also reflects the reality of discourse-analytical research, where interpretation is always situated, argued, and open to critical reconsideration.

Such a structure prevents simple copying because the answer must be constructed in relation to the specific text, question, framework, and argument. Even with access to books, students cannot merely reproduce prepared material. They must make decisions, justify them, and produce a coherent analysis under examination conditions.

Suggested Marking Criteria

The marking criteria for an open-book Discourse Analysis examination should be explicit and aligned with doctoral-level learning outcomes. The following criteria may be used or adapted:

Theoretical accuracy: the appropriate and precise use of concepts, models, and analytical frameworks.

Analytical relevance: the direct connection between theoretical tools and the specific features of the text.

Contextual sensitivity: attention to the social, institutional, cultural, political, or interactional context of the discourse.

Use of textual evidence: clear support for claims through specific examples from the text.

Critical judgement: the ability to justify analytical choices, recognise limitations, and avoid overgeneralisation.

Argument coherence: logical organisation, clear progression of ideas, and a persuasive scholarly line of reasoning.

Responsible source use: effective consultation of books and references without mechanical copying or excessive dependence on pre-prepared wording.

Original interpretive contribution: evidence that the student is constructing an independent analysis rather than simply reproducing lecture notes or textbook explanations.

These criteria make clear that the open-book examination does not reward access alone. It rewards disciplined intellectual use of access. Students are expected to demonstrate how they think with sources, not merely that they possess them.

Managing Text-Complexity Anxiety

A central implication of this study is that open-book assessment must directly address text-complexity anxiety. Students may fear that access to books will be compensated for by the selection of an excessively difficult or obscure text. To avoid this, instructors should clarify the expected genre, approximate length, disciplinary relevance, and level of difficulty of examination texts. Students do not need to know the exact text in advance, but they should understand the range of possible text types and the analytical expectations attached to them.

For example, possible examination texts may include a political speech, media article, institutional announcement, classroom interaction, interview extract, public health campaign, academic exchange, social media post, or multimodal advertisement. Each text type should be selected because it allows meaningful discourse analysis, not because it is designed to confuse or overwhelm students.

A short practice session before the examination may also be useful. Students could be shown a sample text and asked to identify possible frameworks, relevant linguistic features, and suitable analytical questions. This does not weaken the examination. Rather, it strengthens validity by ensuring that students understand the nature of the task and are assessed on analytical competence rather than fear management.

Managing AI Use within Open-Book Assessment

Because the study is situated in the age of generative AI, any open-book examination model must include clear guidance on AI use. The aim should not be to pretend that AI does not exist, but to define its boundaries ethically and pedagogically. In a controlled examination setting, the institution may decide that generative AI tools are not permitted during the examination itself. However, students may be allowed to use AI during preparation for clarification, if they remain responsible for verifying concepts through academic sources and producing their own analysis.

The key principle is that AI-generated content must not replace human interpretive judgment. Students should be required to demonstrate their own reasoning, cite authorised academic sources where appropriate, and connect theoretical concepts to textual evidence. If AI is used in preparatory stages, students should be trained to treat it as a preliminary aid rather than an authoritative source. The final examination response must remain the student's own scholarly work.

This approach is more realistic than simple prohibition. It recognises that doctoral students already inhabit digitally mediated learning environments, while also insisting that academic competence depends on critical verification, ethical judgement, and independent interpretation.

Example of an Open-Book Examination Task

The following example illustrates how the proposed model may be applied in a doctoral Discourse Analysis course: Examination Task: You are given a short institutional statement addressing a public controversy. Using one or two appropriate discourse-analytical frameworks, analyse how the text constructs responsibility, authority, and public trust.

In your answer, you should: identify the genre, communicative purpose, and socio-institutional context of the text; justify your choice of analytical framework or frameworks; analyse relevant linguistic or discursive features, such as agency, modality, nominalisation, pronoun use, evaluation, framing, intertextuality, or representation; support your interpretation with specific examples from the text; reflect briefly on the limitations of your chosen framework and suggest how another approach might extend the analysis.

This task cannot be answered effectively through memorisation alone. Nor can it be answered by copying from a book. It requires the student to use theoretical knowledge, textual evidence, contextual reasoning, and critical judgment in an integrated manner. It therefore reflects the type of competence expected of doctoral researchers.

Summary of the Model

The proposed contextual model positions open-book assessment as a rigorous, research-oriented form of evaluation. Its purpose is not to make examinations easier, but to make them more authentic, valid, and aligned with the intellectual work of doctoral Discourse Analysis. By allowing students to consult authorised sources while requiring them to produce independent analysis, the model restores the academic book as an active tool of thought and reduces the dominance of memorisation as the central measure of competence.

For this model to succeed, however, open-book examinations must be carefully designed. They require clear resource policies, transparent rubrics, fair text selection, explicit AI-use boundaries, and student preparation. Without these elements, the format may reproduce anxiety or confusion. With them, open-book assessment can become a powerful means of cultivating deep scholarly reading, higher-order analytical thinking, and research-based doctoral competence.

Implications for Doctoral Pedagogy and Higher Education Reform

The implications of this study extend beyond a single course. First, doctoral programmes should reconsider the dominance of closed-book examinations in theory-intensive subjects. While closed-book tests may have value in some contexts, they should not be treated as the default measure of academic seriousness. In courses where the central outcomes are interpretation, theoretical selection, and evidence-based analysis, assessment should be designed to capture these higher-order practices more directly.

Second, instructors should recognise that assessment design shapes reading behaviour. If programmes want students to return to books, assessment must make books functionally important in the learning process. Open-book examinations can support this aim by requiring students to annotate, organise, compare, and consult academic sources as part of preparation and performance. In this way, the academic book is restored not as an object of memorisation, but as an active instrument of scholarly reasoning.

Third, artificial intelligence should be addressed through assessment redesign rather than denial. Students are already learning in AI-mediated environments. The task of higher education is therefore to cultivate critical, ethical, and scholarly use of available tools. Assessment models that reward interpretation, verification, and contextual judgement are better suited to this environment than models that rely primarily on the temporary storage and reproduction of information.

For the Libyan higher education context, open-book examinations could offer a practical and culturally responsive reform. They do not require expensive technological infrastructure. They require thoughtful design, clear criteria, fair text selection, and institutional willingness to recognise that doctoral competence is not identical with memorisation.



In a context where postgraduate students are expected to become researchers, assessment should mirror research practices as closely as possible.

Limitations of the Study

This study is qualitative, exploratory, and context-specific. It focuses on one doctoral learning environment within the Libyan Academy for Postgraduate Studies, Janzour, with particular attention to a Discourse Analysis course in the Department of English. Accordingly, the findings cannot be statistically generalised to all Libyan universities, all doctoral programmes, or all disciplinary contexts. Rather, the value of the study lies in its interpretive depth, its insider perspective, and its ability to illuminate a pedagogical issue that may resonate with comparable theory-intensive postgraduate settings.

The autoethnographic dimension is one of the strengths of the study because it provides access to lived doctoral experience, including forms of cognitive pressure, examination anxiety, and scholarly reading behaviour that may not be easily captured through external observation alone. At the same time, this insider position requires reflexive caution. The researcher is part of the educational context under investigation, and therefore, the analysis must remain attentive to the distinction between personal experience, critical interpretation, and broader pedagogical relevance.

The netnographic stakeholder corpus also has limitations. Although the responses of Libyan academics, lecturers, and postgraduate researchers provide valuable professional insight, the number of participants remains relatively small and reflects the exploratory nature of the study rather than a comprehensive empirical survey. The stakeholder data were derived from naturally occurring academic discussions rather than from structured interviews or formal questionnaires. This gives the data authenticity and spontaneity, but it also limits the extent to which participants' views can be treated as representative of wider institutional opinion.

A further limitation concerns the use of named participants. Since some stakeholder contributions are connected to identifiable professional names, the manuscript must ensure that consent has been clearly documented and that participants' views are represented accurately, respectfully, and within their original scholarly context. Where explicit consent is available, naming participants can strengthen contextual authenticity. However, the final version submitted to a journal should still comply with the ethical requirements of the target publication, particularly regarding informed consent, confidentiality, and reputational protection.

Finally, the study does not measure actual examination performance under open-book and closed-book conditions. Its contribution is interpretive and pedagogical rather than experimental. Future research is therefore needed to test the proposed model empirically and to examine how different assessment formats affect student performance, stress levels, quality of discourse analysis, and long-term engagement with academic books.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future research could extend the present study in several directions. First, comparative empirical studies are needed to examine student performance in open-book and closed-book Discourse Analysis examinations across different doctoral programmes and institutions. Such studies could investigate whether open-book assessment improves the quality of textual analysis, theoretical selection, and argument construction when compared with conventional memory-based testing.

Second, future work could adopt mixed-method designs that combine qualitative reflection with quantitative measures of examination anxiety, cognitive load, student performance, and reading behaviour. This would strengthen the external validity of the findings while preserving the interpretive depth needed to understand doctoral learning experiences.

Third, longitudinal research could examine whether open-book assessment improves students' long-term retention of theoretical understanding and their ability to apply discourse-analytical frameworks beyond the immediate examination setting. This is particularly important because the goal of doctoral education is not short-term performance, but the formation of independent researchers capable of sustained analytical work.

Fourth, further studies should investigate the relationship between AI-assisted learning and postgraduate reading practices in Libyan and wider Arab higher education contexts. Such research could examine how doctoral students use generative AI in preparation for theory-intensive courses, how this use affects engagement with primary

academic sources, and how assessment design can promote ethical and critical use of AI rather than superficial dependence.

Fifth, discipline-specific open-book assessment rubrics should be developed, tested, and refined for fields such as Applied Linguistics, Translation Studies, Discourse Analysis, TESOL, and other humanities and social science disciplines. These rubrics should clarify how theoretical accuracy, contextual sensitivity, textual evidence, critical judgement, and responsible source use can be assessed at the postgraduate level.

Finally, future research should explore instructors' perspectives on institutional constraints and opportunities related to alternative assessment models. Understanding how university lecturers, programme coordinators, and assessment committees perceive open-book examinations would provide a more complete picture of the administrative, pedagogical, and cultural conditions required for sustainable assessment reform.

Conclusion

In conclusion, rethinking assessment in doctoral education is not a minor technical adjustment. It is a necessary response to broader transformations in how knowledge is accessed, processed, and produced in contemporary academia. For doctoral Discourse Analysis education, particularly within the Libyan higher education context, open-book examinations offer a promising route towards a post-memorisation model of assessment—one that values critical interpretation, scholarly responsibility, and independent analytical expertise.

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