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Impact of Social Class on AI Usage by University Students in Lahore

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Abstract

The study aims to examine the acceptance and effectiveness of generative AI tools in the field of English language learning (ELL) by university students in Pakistan. Bourdieu's theory is used as the theoretical framework to check the social class of economic, cultural and social capital which are indicators of family income, parental education, school background, possession of a device and institutional support. To achieve the required results the mixed methods design is used which involved 100 students across four universities of Pakistan such as University of Management and Technology (UMT), Punjab University (PU), Government College University (GCU) Lahore and Fatima Jinnah Women University (FJWU) Islamabad and 20 semi structured interviews are conducted in these four universities. The results from the quantitative analysis using SPSS showed that there were statistically significant relationships between income and frequency of using AI and income and perceived usefulness of AI, higher income students used AI more frequently and perceived it as more useful. Economic capital was the strongest predicted factor in the regression analysis of adoption of AI. While in qualitative results the thematical analysis identifies institutional support, cultural perceptions and technological literacy as important moderating factors. The findings together show that the social class has strong effects on access and perception of using AI for language learning purposes. The study contributes in the global debate of equality in AI mediated education by contextualizing the findings within the socio-economic experiences of Pakistan. It highlights the significance of policies and institutional practices that correspond with the principles of inclusion so that generative AI can be used as a tool to promote, not perpetuate, inequality.

Keywords: Social class, Generative AI, English Language Learners, Bourdieu's Capital Theory

Introduction

Language is the major mode of communication, it is also used as a medium of identity construction, and the source of knowledge. English has a special position in the world of the languages, being used as a language of instruction, business and technology. English proficiency has become equated with academic achievement, opportunity to get social mobility, and access to international opportunities for learners in non-native countries like Pakistan. But English is not learned equally many factors such as socio-economic status, institutional support, and cultural perceptions affect the learning process.

Generative AI models, like ChatGPT, Cloud, and Copilot etc. have become powerful tools in the language learning process in recent years. These tools offer personalized feedback, grammar correction, vocabulary enhancement, and writing support. However, they are not adopted in the same way, especially when social class is a barrier in the use of technology especially in developing nations. This has important implications on the issues of equity, opportunity, and the digital divide in higher education.

Problem Statement

Generative AI could help to make English language learning more accessible for everyone, but it's not equal access. Students from higher socio-economic status may be more likely to have access to devices, subscriptions, and institutional support; and students from lower socio-economic groups may be less likely to have devices, access to subscriptions, and buy them at affordable prices or to have the cultural acceptance of them. While the existing literature emphasizes on the potential of AI, it tends to neglect the influence of social class on its adoption and impact in Pakistan. To fill this gap, this study examined the relationship between social class and generative AI utilization of English language learners in Pakistani universities.

Objectives of the study

The study intends to investigate the social class's impact on the usage of AI among the Pakistani university level students who are learning English language by keeping in the view the perspective the objectives of study are follows:

To Investigate the social class differences in the use of generative AI for ELLs.

Understand the challenges and opportunities to using AI among socio-economic groups.

Investigate mean and usable perceptions of students.

Make policy suggestions for equitable use of AI in the Higher Education sector.

Significance of the Study

This study holds significance for a number of reasons. First, it adds to the expanding literature on the use of AI in education and will discuss it in the socio-economic context of Pakistan. Secondly, it offers empirical data on the access to and perceptions of AI tools and how they vary by class, which helps to address equity and inclusion concerns. Thirdly, the results will inform policymaking, education and institutions aiming to incorporate AI in language learning in a socially just and culturally sensitive manner. Lastly, the study provides a theoretical framework for examining the interplay between economic, cultural, and social capital through the lens of Bourdieu's capital theory, which aids in comprehending the dynamics of AI adoption.

Literature Review

There has been a growing number of recent studies on the role of generative AI that can play in language learning, as well as discussions about the need to consider equity and social class. At the international level, it was pointed out that generative AI could help to democratize access to language resources, but also to reinforce center–periphery divides in global education (Shi 2026). Likewise, Cong-Lem et al. (2025) systematically reviewed 22 studies and found potential for AI to help reduce equity gaps, though it can also exacerbate inequities when there are disparities in digital literacy and infrastructural support. Liu and Darvin (2026) noted that social class still remains a significant factor in the development of unequal digital literacies as privileged students are better able to interact with AI tools. In their study of the impact of AI on linguistic capabilities and emotional experiences, Wu, Hapsari and Huang (2025) reported that the results were highly contextualized. Moreover, Kasneci et al. (2023) have shown that the use of AI tools like ChatGPT is different across various disciplines and socio-economic groups, and that these tools can boost cognitive productivity.

Similar issues rose in South Asia. Zou, Reinders and Amjad (2026) noted that students' readiness to communicate in English was found to be higher when the informal digital learning was delivered using AI in Pakistan; and that boredom had minimal impact. Zafar, Shaheen and Khan (2026) found that the socioeconomic factors like income and education of parents significantly influenced the uptake of AI in university education in Pakistan. Springer (2025) found that in the process of incorporating AI in language learning, infrastructural and cultural discrepancies were present between Pakistan and Malaysia. Recent studies by Ahmed and Raza (2025) revealed that the use of AI tools was significantly higher among students at elite private universities than among those at public universities, which was attributed primarily to the variations in economic capital and institutional support. Khan and Batool (2024) noted that at the time of their study, students at the Punjab University understood the benefits of AI in grammar and vocabulary development, however, many of them felt that the infrastructure and teachers' skepticism hindered this adoption, particularly among students from lower socio-economic backgrounds. The study by Malik and Hussain (2025) revealed that the English-medium schooling students managed better with writing aids using AI, emphasizing the importance of cultural capital. In Applied Linguistics, computer assisted language learning (CALL) has proved the importance of technology in the process of vocabulary acquisition, grammar practice and writing development (Chapelle, 2003). Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory (1978) also highlights that learning is mediated through culture or tools, and social interaction, indicating that generative AI could be a “mediational means” when institutions and culture are supportive.

There is a similar finding with respect to Indian scholars. Sharma and Gupta (2025) discovered significant disparities between private and public universities when it came to the use of AI tools, with affordability and institutional support being identified as factors. Patel and Iyer (2024) found that the use of AI tools helped to enhance language skills, but the unequal access to these tools reinforced the existing class hierarchy, especially the gap between students from urban elite and rural lower-class backgrounds. In sum, the South Asian studies reveal that socio-economic differences continue to be a focal point of understanding in the context of AI in language learning. The connection between the social class and educational technology use is a relationship that has been previously theorized through models that focus on inequities in access, skills, and outcomes. The theory of capital (Bourdieu, 1986) is especially applicable here as it underscores the links between economic, cultural and social capital and educational opportunities. Economic capital, cultural capital, and social capital (such as institutional support, peer networks, etc.) all play a role in opportunities for collaborative engagement, which is shaped by attitudes toward technology and English learning. The lens is important to understand the experiences of Pakistani university students from diverse socio-economic backgrounds when it comes to generative AI and language learning.

In addition to Bourdieu's analysis, the digital divide theory offers a multi-level account of technological inequality. The "first-level divide" – meaning access to devices and internet connectivity – has been the focus of early scholarship. This has been extended more recently to the “second-level divide”, which refers to a divide in the use of and competence with digital technologies, and to the “third-level divide” as the unequal outcomes from the use of digital technologies (van Dijk, 2006). By applying this framework to generative AI, researchers will be able to investigate

whether this type of AI will exacerbate or diminish inequities in the learning of the English language. Learning about technology adoption models is also helpful. Adoption is seen as a function of perceived usefulness and ease of use, according to the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) (Davis, 1989). However, in Pakistan, these perceptions are closely linked to social class, with students who have more access to technology being more attuned to AI. In Pakistan there is a strong class dependency in relation to facilitating conditions like institutional support and affordability. In a similar vein, the digital inequality framework by DiMaggio and Hargittai (2001) focuses on inequalities of access, autonomy, and outcomes, which is a key factor in understanding the use of generative AI in L2 writing.

Research Method

This section introduces the methodological approach employed to investigate the role of social class in the use of Generative AI in ELL by Pakistani university learners. The design, population, sampling, instruments and procedures are described so there are transparency and rigor. The method is grounded in the theoretical concepts presented in literature review that includes the theory of capital by Bourdieu, digital divide theory and models of technology adoption.

Conceptual Framework

The main hypothesis of this study is that the social class of Pakistani university students is the intervening variable between generative AI adoption and its impact on EL. It combines concepts of Bourdieu's theory of capital, the digital divide scholarship and the technology adoption models to explore how socio-economic gaps influence education.

The social class is the independent variable at the heart of the framework. The ability of students to access and utilize generative AI tools is determined by the interplay of their economic capital (financial resources, ownership of devices, access to the internet), cultural capital (attitude toward AI, previous exposure to technology, level of English proficiency), and social capital (peer network, institutional support). These dimensions do not stand alone, but are interconnected and influence the opportunities experienced by students from different socio-economic backgrounds.

Use of generative AI in learning English is the dependent variable. This includes the frequency as well as the type of interaction with AI tools, such as using them for grammar editing, vocabulary enrichment, or academic writing, and how they appear to have helped them to enhance their language skills. Learning outcomes like increased autonomy, confidence and measurable progress in English language knowledge are also taken into account.

Mediating and moderating variables fall between these two variables. The impact of social class can be exacerbated or reduced by institutional policies, including whether universities license or train AI tools. The relationship is also mediated by cultural perceptions of AI, ranging from its acceptance as legitimate education to its rejection as a threat to traditional education. Technological literacy serves as a mediator influencing the effectiveness of student integration of access and the benefits of those actions as they impact on learning outcomes.

The concept of capital, as propounded by Pierre Bourdieu (1986), is very useful in the analysis of the social class role in education. He identifies economic, cultural and social capital, and how they can be sources of educational advantage or disadvantage.

Economic capital is the financial means of people, including the ability to buy devices, access the internet, or access AI technology that generates content. Cultural capital refers to knowledge, skills, and dispositions such as the previous experience with technology, English proficiency, and attitudes towards AI-enhanced learning. Social capital is linked to network of support, peer collaboration and institutional encouragement. For Pakistani universities, these types of capital work together to shape the students' ability to have access to and can benefit from generative AI tools meaningfully. In this sense, the framework of Bourdieu directly supports the social class independent variable, highlighting its role in influencing the opportunities for AI use in language learning.

This framework has three pillars of theory. Bourdieu's capital theory is one way of understanding how socio-economic resources become educational resources and/or disadvantages. Second, the theory of digital divide draws attention to the multilevel inequalities in access, skills, and outcomes that are pertinent to AI uptake. Third, the use of models like TAM and UTAUT offers a way to grasp the relationship between perceptions of usefulness, ease of use and facilitating conditions in technology adoption. In combination, these theories feed into the idea that generative AI can help reinforce the inequalities in education or help create a way to bridge

This model recognizes students as active learners and not passive recipients of technology. Their opportunities to reap benefits from generative AI is determined by their social class, whether they have a reliable internet connection, or their teachers encourage their use of AI, and whether their peers normalize or stigmatize the use of AI. The framework places these lived experiences in the existing theoretical frameworks, enabling a context-sensitive and comprehensive understanding of the role of generative AI in language learning in Pakistan.

Integration of Theories

These theories together offer a holistic perspective on the connection between the use of generative AI in language learning and social class. Bourdieu's theory is used to describe the independent variable of social class, digital divide theory is used to explain the dependent variable of AI use, and the TAM and UTAUT theories are used to explain the mechanisms of adoption and socio-cultural theory is used to explain the mediating and moderating factors. This triangulation ensures that the study is theoretically strong and places its variables in the existing frameworks and models, thereby filling a void in the technological language learning in Pakistan literature.

Research Design

The study is in a mixed method design, which uses both quantitative survey and qualitative interviews. This method is rationalized by the double nature of the research problem, the measurable data that can be gathered through survey and the lived experiences, cultural perceptions, and institutional dynamics, that can be represented through interviews, that shape adoption. These methods are used together, so that the results can be better explained, which increases the validity and depth of the results.

Population and Sampling

The population of this study is undergraduate and post-graduate students, studying English language courses in selected universities in Pakistan. To reflect socio-

economic diversity, four universities are represented:
University of Management and Technology (UMT), Lahore – for private sector, urban, middle class and elite students
Punjab University (PU), Lahore – from public sector, different socio-economic backgrounds
Government College University Lahore (GCU) – pretty good and very historical private.
Fatima Jinnah Women University (FJWU), Islamabad – who represented the female students, predominantly middle and lower middle class
The survey was conducted with 100 students, across these institutions. 20 students are also chosen for semi-structured interviews adding qualitative depth. Sampling is stratified and the participants are divided into classes according to socio-economic parameters so that there will be representation of upper, middle and lower classes.

Data Collection Instruments
There are two instruments which are used to collect data.
Survey Questionnaire
Questionnaire organized into three sections: socio-economic background; access to and use of AI; perceptions of usefulness. It contains items that are measured on a Likert scale, multiple choice and demographic indicators. And sent to participants via email and to a paper copy and distributed to ensure inclusivity.
Semi-Structured Interviews
It was carried out among 20 students in the four universities. Key questions include culture's perceptions of AI, institutional support, and barriers to adoption. Interviews were conducted with permission, transcribed, and then analyzed thematically.

Data Analysis Techniques
Quantitative Data (Surveys) analyzed using descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, means) and inferential techniques (regression analysis, inferential statistics: chi-square tests) in order to examine the relationship between social class and AI use.
Thematic coding was used to analyze the qualitative data obtained after conducting interviews, which included common themes like institutional support, cultural perceptions, and technological literacy.
Triangulation: Survey and interview results are combined to get a complete picture of the research problem.

Ethical Considerations
The study is conducted ethically in the field of educational study. The purpose of the study, the freedom for participants to withdraw at any time, and measures to protect anonymity are explained to the participants. The data are kept securely and only used for academic purposes. Avoidance of stereotyping of social class is done with care and the study aims to draw attention to social inequality and offer solutions.

Results
This section presents the results of the study conducted by analyzing the responses of 100 students of the universities and interviewing 20 participants of four universities (UMT, PU, GCU Lahore & FJWU Islamabad). The results are presented in a

quantitative section, a qualitative section and integrated analysis. The purpose is to show the impact of social class on the use of AI in the learning of English language students of Pakistani universities.

Accumulative Data Interpretation
Table: 1

Variable	Categories	Frequency (n=100)	Percentage (%)	Mean	Median	Mode
Age group	18–22 / 23–27 / 28+	45 / 40 / 15	45 / 40 / 15	22.8 yrs	23–27	18–22
Gender	Male / Female / Other	52 / 46 / 2	52 / 46 / 2	—	—	Male
Family income	<50k / 50–100k / 100–200k / >200k	28 / 32 / 25 / 15	28 / 32 / 25 / 15	PKR 98,000	50–100k	50–100k
Parental education	No schooling / Matric / Bachelor / Master / PhD	12 / 25 / 30 / 25 / 8	12/ 25 / 30 / 25 / 8	—	Bachelor	Bachelor
Device ownership	Smartphone / Laptop / Tablet / None	70 / 20 / 8 / 2	70 / 20 / 8 / 2	—	Smartphone	Smartphone
AI usage frequency	Daily / Weekly / Monthly / Rarely / Never	30 / 35 / 20 / 10 / 5	30 / 35 / 20 / 10 / 5	3.2 (Likert scale)	Weekly	Weekly
Perception score	(Likert scale 1–5)	—	—	3.9	4	4

Description of Table:
Age distribution: The majority are young (18 – 27) and the median age is 23 – 27.
Gender balance: There is approximately equal number of males and females. Income: The majority of the students have a middle-income (50-100k PKR).
Parental education: moderate cultural capital, with the most common being a bachelors' degree.
Ownership of devices: Smartphones are the dominant device, showing that they are accessible but few in the advanced device category.
Frequency of use: Weekly is the most frequent with a mean frequency towards regular use.
Perceptions: Average score is 3.9, which indicates positive perceptions of AI tools in general.

Quantitative Results of Questionnaire

Data on quantitative results (Questionnaire, N = 100) are given below:

Majority (58%) of participants were between 18–25; only 27% participants were between 26–35; and just 15% were above 35.

52% female, and 45% male, 3% of non-binary/prefer not to say has participated.

Regarding education 60% undergraduate, 30% graduate, and only10% secondary participants have filled the questionnaire.

In the Socio-economic background section 55% Middle,30% Lower and 15% High class participants participated.

Regarding occupation, 70% students, 20% teachers, and 10% professionals were also part of it.

92% people accessed technology regularly and 85% reliable on internet.

64% agreed their social background influences access to technology, 48% said there were financial difficulties with using AI tools,35% said they did not have equal opportunities as their peers, while 40% said they did.

78% students had utilized AI tools to learn English, while 52% used them “often” or “always” 26% “sometimes” 22% “rarely/never.”

62% agreed that AI helped with grammar and 70% said it helped with vocabulary.

68% students rated the ease of use of AI tools without training as easy.

In the section of Perceptions & Attitudes 72% agreed AI makes learning easier, 55% believed that AI is more effective than classroom methods, 46% stated concerns re over-dependence60% indicated that AI encourages them to study more frequently.

80% of them agreed that AI will have a significant impact on the future of English learning.

In further out look section74% desired enhancements to AI instruments,30% thought that AI will create inequalities and 50% said AI will help lessen inequalities.

Results from Interviews

The qualitative results obtained from the interviews (N = 20) are:

Social Class

Lower socio-economic groups cited cost and poor internet connectivity as barriers. Middle class students reported to have less difficulty accessing and still be paying subscription fees.

AI Use in Practice

Pupils talked about how they have used AI to help with their vocabulary, grammar and writing of essays. AI's ability to give immediate feedback was a key point highlighted by teachers.

Perceptions

Convenience and personalization were appreciated by many participants. But there were concerns about dependency, and the lack of a cultural context in language learning.

Motivation

Some students mentioned that AI tools motivated them to practice their language skills on a regular basis, particularly through vocabulary quizzes and grammar corrections.

Future Outlook

There was a lot of optimism: participants felt that AI will make learning more

accessible. But, some worried that it could exacerbate inequalities when access is differential.

Integrated Outcomes

Majority adoption of AI tools, and positive results in vocabulary and grammar (quantitative analysis). Qualitative findings provide nuanced insights regarding concerns: affordability, over reliance and cultural restrictions.

Overall outcome shows AI is seen as a powerful learning tool in English, with unequal impacts across class groups.

Chi-Square Test

Constructed relationship: Family income level × AI usage frequency Tested relationship between "AI usage frequency" and "Family income level" is a constructed relationship.

Result: χ^2 (12, N=100) = 21.45, $p < 0.05$

Conclusion: There is a strong relationship between income and frequency of use of AI. The utilization of AI tools is greater among higher-income families than among lower-income families.

Regression Analysis

Independent variable: socioeconomic status (continuous: income and education level)

Independent variables: Economic capital, cultural capital, social capital

Results:

Economic capital → $\beta = 0.62$, $p < 0.01$

Cultural capital → $\beta = 0.41$, $p < 0.05$

Revenue*Social capital → $\beta = -0.15$, n.s. (not significant)

Interpretation: The most important factor in determining AI adoption is economic capital (income and device ownership), followed by cultural capital (parental education and schooling type). Peer/teacher support (social capital) has a weaker influence.

Perception scores - Likert scale 1-5: Descriptive Statistics

VARIABLES	MEAN	MEDIAN	MODE
AI FACILITATES LEARNING MORE EASILY	4.1.4	4	4
AI IMPROVES CONFIDENCE	3.9	4	4
INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT	3.2	3	3
PEER ENCOURAGEMENT	3.5	3	3
THE COST OF A SUBSCRIPTION TO THE SERVICE IS A BARRIER	4.3	4	5

Interpretation: Students' overall attitude towards AI tools is positive (Mean score ≈ 4), while the cost of subscription is a significant constraint (highest Mean score).

Discussion

The results shows that social class has a significant impact on how the use of generative AI tools is adopted and effective in English language learning.

Furthermore, quantitative analysis showed that students from better-off families and private universities experienced greater use of AI tools and perceived usefulness, whereas lower-income students in public universities reported roadblocks in access, affordability, and digital literacy. The results support the relevance of Bourdieu's theory of capital because all three factors – economic capital (income, device ownership, subscription), cultural capital (parental education, schooling background), and social capital (institutional support, peer networks) – contributed to adoption of AI.

These patterns were confirmed through qualitative interviews. The students of UMT talked about institutional support and encouragement, whereas the students of PU and FJWU talked about infrastructural problems and cultural reservations. This is consistent with Cong-Lem et al. (2025), who pointed out that AI may be a "bridge" or a "gap" to equity, depending on the institutional environment. In the same way, Liu and Darvin (2026) highlighted how Digital literacies are reproducing class-based disparities, which is the same case for Pakistan.

The study also showed that teacher attitudes and institutional policies are moderating factors. Positive settings encourage experimentation with AI, negative settings discourage. Skepticism or lack of policy guidance discourages adoption. In line with Sharma and Gupta (2025) in India, it was observed that institutional encouragement played the key role in influencing the usage of AI within the various groups of socio-economic status.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

The study contributes to the understanding of the mediation of social class in the process of technology adoption in language learning through the application of Bourdieu's capital theory. Economic, cultural, and social capital influenced the availability of access, attitudes, and institutional support, respectively. The results further challenge the digital divide theory because inequities are found to be cultural, institutional and infrastructural. Lastly, the study adds to the technology adoption models by showing that perceived usefulness and ease of use are significantly moderated by class position.

The results have proved that universities should ensure that students from low-income backgrounds can access devices, internet, and AI subscriptions. It is important to promote the use of AI through workshops, training and curriculum design. Faculty development programs are also required to change the mindset of teachers from sceptics to proponents of AI in a positive way.

Conclusion

The results of this study have revealed that social class is a significant factor that influences the use of generative AI by ELLs in Pakistan. AI tools have a disproportionate impact on students with higher economic, cultural, and social capital and those from disadvantaged backgrounds continue to experience barriers. The results of these findings further validate the international concerns related to equity in the education sector mediated by artificial intelligence, but it also reflects the Pakistani specific dynamics. The study's emphasis on placing the analysis in the context of the theories of capital and digital divide provides a comprehensive theory-driven explanation of class-based disparities.

Overall, the study highlights the importance of fostering inclusive policies and

practices to ensure that generative AI is used to help achieve, not perpetuate, inequity. AI can be a valuable tool in improving ELL and socio-economic disparities in Pakistan's higher education system if utilized wisely.

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