

Learning English as Inherited Disadvantage and Earned Capital: ESL Acquisition Strategies Among First-Generation Pakistani University Students

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ABSTRACT

First-generation university students in Pakistan, those without a family history of higher education, often enter university with limited prior exposure to English as an academic and social language, positioning ESL acquisition as both an obstacle to overcome and a resource to accumulate. While prior research has examined motivation and attitudes toward English learning through a social capital lens, comparatively little attention has been paid to the specific, strategy-level behaviors these learners adopt to acquire English proficiency in the absence of family linguistic capital. This study investigates the concrete ESL learning strategies, including cognitive, metacognitive, social, and compensatory strategies, employed by first-generation Pakistani university students, comparing their strategy use to that of continuing-generation peers and examining how these strategies are shaped by the absence of intergenerational English exposure at home. Using an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design that combines a validated language learning strategy inventory administered to 320 undergraduates with in-depth interviews with 18 first-generation students, the research documents which strategies first-generation students rely on most, how these differ from continuing-generation peers, and how students describe compensating for limited family linguistic resources through peer networks, digital media, and self-directed practice. Quantitative results showed that first-generation students reported significantly lower use of cognitive and metacognitive strategies but significantly higher use of compensation and social strategies relative to continuing-generation peers, a pattern corroborated by qualitative interviews emphasizing peer networks and self-directed digital resources as primary compensatory mechanisms. By shifting focus from motivational attitudes to observable strategy use, this study offers actionable insight for designing targeted ESL support programs for first-generation students within Pakistani higher education institutions.

Keywords: First-Generation Students; Language Learning Strategies; Social Capital; ESL Acquisition; Pakistani Higher Education

1. Introduction

This is because the number of first-generation university students is a significant fraction of the rapidly growing student population of the university and is on the increase as decades of effort have been made to increase access to higher education for traditionally disadvantaged socio-economic groups. However, this increased access has not eradicated the challenges faced by first-generation students once in university, in particular in the area of English language skills as the overwhelming majority of instruction in Pakistan is in English and many students from Urdu or vernacular medium schools have a relatively weak command of English overall and, crucially, no parents or older siblings who could model, reinforce or informally support English language development at home.

This lack of what can be called “intergenerational linguistic capital”—the English language exposure, modeling, and reinforcement which continuing generation students regularly receive from their parents—sets up the ESL



acquisition process of first-generation students as structurally different from that of their peers, even if both receive the same university-level English instruction. Though many researchers have focused on studying students' motivation, self-efficacy, and overall academic adjustment experiences, and another group has studied English learning motivation and attitudes of Pakistani students in general, less research has directly examined the observable and concrete language learning strategies, that is, the specific cognitive, metacognitive, social, and compensatory behaviors, that students actually use to develop proficiency in English without the support of their families' language.

This study seeks to answer those questions by posing three main questions: Does there exist a systematic difference between the reported use of specific language learning strategy categories among the first-generation and continuing-generation university students? What compensatory language learning strategies do the first-generation students describe employing to make up for the lack of family linguistic capital? How do the first-generation students themselves narrate and make sense of their learning path in English in relation to the lack of family linguistic capital? This study seeks to provide practical data for Pakistani universities to develop targeted support interventions for students from low-income backgrounds at the strategy level, instead of simply sending out motivational messages that cannot tackle students' behavioral gaps.

This inquiry is made more significant given the numbers of first-generation students in the growing higher education system of Pakistan. While successive governments have been implementing policies that seek to expand university education, especially with the establishment of new public sector universities in the previously uneducated districts, the share of first-generation students in the total student body has increased significantly and is likely to be a significant and growing part of the Pakistani student body rather than a small and insignificant minority. Those universities that do not recognize this special strategic profile of first-generation ESL learners and do not take appropriate measures therefore run the risk of failing to serve a significant percentage of their students, and their performance, retention and employability after graduation will suffer considerably in the professional labor market that is rife with English.

This research is also driven by a concern that a generic 'one size fits all' approach to English language support programs – as are often provided in university writing centers or remedial English courses – may be underdeveloped to meet the unique needs of first-generation students, if its content is geared towards continuing-generation students' more familiar learning hurdles. The goal of this study is to move beyond broad evidence-based strategy comparisons to deliver the fine-grained, strategy-specific evidence needed to inform the design of more precisely targeted and, hence, more truly effective institutional support interventions.

Finally, in Pakistan, being a first-generation learner overlaps with another disadvantage, such as rural-urban identity, language (English), and gender, which are likely to exacerbate the particular difficulty of acquiring English that is the subject of this study. A student from a rural area where none of the parents went to college is at a starting point that is significantly different from a student from an urban area who does not have a family legacy of college but has had more incidental exposure to English via media, signage, and social spheres. An intersectional analysis of these factors is beyond the scope of the present study, but the sampling and interview design for this study, by design, included variation across these factors when feasible, and the intersectional complexity of these factors is addressed when interpreting the disciplinary variation found in the quantitative results.

2. Literature Review

The study of first-generation college students has shifted from a deficit perspective, which suggests that there is something wrong with them due to their lack of family background, to a more multi-faceted perspective that recognizes the role of the family environment in interaction with individual agency and institutional support in explaining academic outcomes. Based on a large-scale national survey of Chinese university students, Li, Liu and Hu (2023) concluded that first-generation students' learning motivation was generally lower than the motivation of their continuing-generation counterparts, and that academic outcomes were predicted by individual learning motivation and campus support, which also proved to interact to influence academic outcomes, indicating that the academic pathways of first-generation students were not due to their own deficiencies but rather to their individual and structural characteristics. Glass (2023) builds on this structural approach by exploring the impact of social capital on the college enrollment and persistence of first-generation students, which comprises access to supportive mentoring relationships and networks; in the absence of those mentoring relationships found in family networks, access to informal mentoring relationships had a significant influence on the educational trajectory of first-generation students.

For the purpose of academic English language skills, Ahmed, Iqbal, Arshad, Qayyum, Alkhatib, Tarar, Mahmood and Anwar (2026) conducted a phenomenological study of first-generation Pakistani university students that revealed the effects of low academic English skills on the psychological well-being of the students, such as higher level of language anxiety and a lack of academic self-confidence and a strong sense of intellectual exclusion felt by

the students in the English-dominated university environment, which was found to be a constant source of inadequacy for the students and extended outside the academic environment and class beyond their classrooms into their overall life experiences in the university. This finding confirms that English is not only a tool to use to learn and study but a psychological tool to belong or not, which is likely to influence a first-generation Pakistani student's choice of English learning strategies, and their willingness to learn and improve English.

The wider Pakistani sociolinguistic literature on the use of English as a stratified linguistic resource is helpful in understanding why the first-generation learners may be faced with a unique strategic challenge. Students of Urdu-medium public schools of Pakistan showed on average a much higher level of feeling excluded from the use of English and lacked confidence in using English, compared to students from the English-medium private schools, which was generally the background of students who are first-generation in the Pakistani university system, as shown by Amin (2025). A larger disjuncture between the rhetoric of multilingual education policy in Pakistan and its reality in classrooms, which disadvantage students from the very rural and socially and economically less privileged backgrounds from which first-generation students are most likely to come, and whose own prior experience of functional English is comparatively less, regardless of formal policy commitments to multilingual equity, is also documented by Ashraf et al. (2021).

The relevance of compensatory learning strategies research, then, in this context of low family language proficiency and psychologically significant exclusion, is even more salient. In this study, the researchers (Fareed, Jamal and Zai, 2021) focus on a specific learning strategy – peer feedback – among a group of Pakistani ESL post-graduates and discover that collaborative peer-based learning strategies often compensated for not having sufficient individual feedback from the teacher, indicating that social strategies might play a particularly important compensatory role for students who have less institutional and family resources to draw upon. In support of this finding, Rezai, Soyoo and Reynolds (2024) point to the importance of informal online learning—such as self-directed access to English-language media, apps, and online communities—as an additional route for acquiring English, especially for children without parental models of English use at home.

Collectively, these texts indicate that first-generation Pakistani students at university experience a unique set of disadvantages and adaptable resourcefulness in learning English. On the other hand, the lack of family linguistic capital coupled with the general class stratification of English as an “elite” linguistic capital in Pakistan, seems to trigger measurable psychological distress and a longstanding sense of marginalisation, especially for students from Urdu medium schools. However, previous studies on peer feedback and informal digital learning indicate that students with greater resource disadvantages may develop effective compensatory digital strategies, such as social or self-directed digital strategies, to partially mitigate their resource disadvantages. No existing study, however, has directly compared the strategy level behavior of first-generation and continuing-generation Pakistani university students based on a validated language learning strategy inventory, nor has any study examined systematically the specific strategy categories that are different between these two groups nor the compensatory mechanisms that first-generation students themselves consider most important. This study directly fills that void.

Another body of literature relevant to this study is the bibliometric and conceptual development of first-generation student research, in general. The shift in framing of first-generation students' college success from a deficit perspective, which views first-generation status as a risk factor for academic failure, to an asset perspective and intervention perspective is captured by the bibliometric analysis of global research trends on first-generation college students conducted by Fei, Kang, Sun, and Hu (2023) across the 22-year span from 2002 to 2022. The present study's specific focus on acquired compensatory strategies as a concrete, language-specific example of the asset-based resilience which is the focus of the growing body of first-generation student scholarship outlined above is therefore set against this broader disciplinary backdrop.

Nevertheless, even in the international literature examined earlier, which largely centers on general academic motivation, support, and persistence outcomes, the intersection of the first-generation status and the use of second language acquisition (SLA) strategies is relatively under-examined, as is the case with Li, Liu, and Hu (2023) and Glass (2023). This gap is even more significant when studying a linguistically stratified environment like Pakistan, where, as opposed to many western higher education systems where the language of instruction is usually aligned with the primary language of the students, irrespective of whether they are 1G or 2G, first-generation students are burdened with learning a new language of instruction while processing the academic content in a new language, in addition to their general first-generation student disadvantage found in the literature broadly that was not directly addressed in the context of language of instruction.

It must also be noted that the notion of family linguistic capital is embedded within the larger theory developed by Bourdieu on the transmission of cultural capital by families which would also involve the transfer of embodied dispositions, tacit knowledge, and practical skills that would give a family the advantage in a given institutional field. In the particular field of English language learning, this can be how a parent demonstrates correct

pronunciation or explains an unfamiliar grammatical structure or how a parent reacts to English media, reading behaviour or the worth and respect of English proficiency. First-generation students, who by definition would have fewer opportunities to develop these embodied dispositions via the norm of the family, are more likely to learn these strategies of language learning outside the family environment, either explicitly or with some structure in the classroom, or through self-directed study. This study's mixed-methods design was specifically suited to capture these kinds of processes.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study was an explanatory sequential mixed methodology design, consisting of a comparative quantitative survey phase followed by a qualitative phase to explain and put the quantitative comparison in context; the qualitative phase focused only on first-generation students in the study. The design was chosen because it will enable a statistically sound comparison between the strategy use of first-generation students and continuing generation students and will give rich and explanatory insights into the specific compensatory mechanisms and lived experiences of first-generation students that has led to their unique strategy profile.

3.2 Sample Size

A total of 320 students from three faculties of a large public sector university in Punjab, Pakistan, participated in the study; 176 were first-generation (students with parents who never completed a bachelor's degree), and 144 were continuing generation (students with parents who did complete a bachelor's degree) of students, recruited using stratified convenience sampling to ensure adequate representation. After consulting with the survey phase, 18 first-generation students were purposefully selected for semi-structured interviews based on a maximum variation approach designed to obtain a diversity of academic disciplines, genders and self-reported strategy use profiles from the survey phase.

3.3 Instruments

There were two major instruments used. Language learning strategy use was assessed with an adapted version of Oxford's Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL), which includes six items for each of the six language learning strategy categories as well as an additional item battery to determine whether students were first-generation or continuing-generation learners based on parents' education level. For the qualitative phase, a semi-structured interview guide was used that focused on the first-generation participants' family and schooling contexts and their perceptions of the lack of family linguistic support, as well as the types of strategies they described using to make up for this lack.

3.4 Data Collection

The data collection was carried out in 6 phases. The first phase involved administering the adapted SILL and generational status questionnaire to the entire sample ($n=320$). In the second phase, independent-samples t-tests were used to determine differences in the mean scores of strategies use for the six categories of SILL between the first-generation and continuing generation students. In the third stage, 18 first-generation respondents were purposefully selected to be interviewed following the survey based on the diversity in their responses and demographics. During the fourth phase, semi-structured interviews were held, audio recorded, and verbatim transcribed, with an emphasis on the use of strategies and compensation practices. During the fifth phase, a reflexive thematic analysis approach was used to analyse the transcripts thematically. The results of the quantitative and qualitative analyses phases were merged in the sixth and final phase in order to build a profile of the acquisition of first language English in the strategy level.

3.5 Data Analysis

Data was analyzed quantitatively by descriptive statistics and independent-samples t-tests to determine the mean strategy use scores for the six SILL categories between the first-generation and continuing generation students. Reflexive thematic analysis was then used to analyze the qualitative data; the 18 first-generation interview transcripts were used to induce themes and these were later examined in relation to the quantitative strategy comparison in order to look for explanatory convergence.

Before analyzing the data it was checked for internal consistency of the adapted SILL instrument, by calculating the Cronbach's alpha coefficient for each of the six strategy subscales, which was found to be in the range from 0.74 (affective strategies subscale) to 0.86 (metacognitive strategies subscale), satisfying the conventional rule of acceptability of 0.70 and therefore warranting the use of the instrument in the comparative analysis that was carried

out in this study. Generational status classification was corroborated with a secondary item where participants were asked to indicate separately the highest educational level achieved by their father and their mother, and direct follow-up with the participant was used to resolve any discrepancies in the classification prior to finalizing the classification of the participants to a generational group.

3.6 Ethical Consideration

The study was conducted with ethical approval from the host university's research ethics committee and informed consent obtained from all the participants in the survey and interview. Since some of the questions in the interview included reference to the family's educational background and, in a few instances, economic situation, the interview protocol was tailored to specifically address these issues and participants were advised that they could refuse to answer any particular question or that they could refuse to be interviewed altogether without having any impact on their status with the university or the research team.

4. Results and Findings

Table 1 presents the comparison of mean strategy use scores between first-generation and continuing-generation students across the six SILL categories. Results indicate that first-generation students reported significantly lower use of cognitive and metacognitive strategies compared to continuing-generation peers, a pattern consistent with reduced exposure to structured, planning-oriented approaches to language learning typically modeled within educated families. Conversely, first-generation students reported significantly higher use of compensation and social strategies than their continuing-generation peers, suggesting that these students actively compensate for reduced structured strategy use through guessing, paraphrasing, and reliance on peer networks. No significant differences emerged for memory or affective strategy use between the two groups.

Strategy Category	First-Gen (n=176) M (SD)	Continuing-Gen (n=144) M (SD)	t (df=318)
Memory strategies	3.28 (0.61)	3.31 (0.58)	0.46
Cognitive strategies	3.19 (0.66)	3.58 (0.54)	5.87**
Compensation strategies	3.71 (0.57)	3.42 (0.60)	4.35**
Metacognitive strategies	2.94 (0.69)	3.49 (0.59)	7.62**
Affective strategies	2.97 (0.63)	3.02 (0.61)	0.71
Social strategies	3.66 (0.58)	3.38 (0.56)	4.28**

Table 1. Mean language learning strategy use by generational status (5-point scale). ** $p < .01$.

Table 2 provides an overview of the main qualitative themes that emerged from the thematic analysis of the 18 first-generation student interviews. Peer networks were the most common compensatory resource cited by a large majority of participants as the most important substitute for the lack of a family linguistic resource at home. In the same way, the use of digital media with self-directed learning was widely distributed, where participants reported the extensive use of English-language films as informal learning media, as well as social media and mobile applications. A large proportion of participants also explicitly reported lack of structured planning advice at home, confirming the quantitative results regarding less metacognitive strategy use, and a similarly high proportion reported compensating through guessing and paraphrasing to link comprehension and production, confirming the quantitative results regarding more compensation strategy use. Lastly, a number of the participants' self-taught progress was described in a positive way that had less to do with a deficit and more to do with pride and resilience, indicating an affective dimension in participants' own presentation of their self-taught progress.

Qualitative Theme	Participants (n=18)	% of Sample	Associated Strategy Type
Peer networks as primary compensatory resource	15	83%	Social
Self-directed digital media reliance	14	78%	Compensation
Absence of structured planning guidance at home	13	72%	Metacognitive (deficit)
Guessing and paraphrasing to bridge gaps	12	67%	Compensation

Pride and resilience framing of self-taught progress	11	61%	Affective / Motivational
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Table 2. Frequency of qualitative themes among first-generation student interview participants (n = 18) and associated SILL strategy category.

A secondary analysis of strategy use among first-generation students by academic discipline found that the gap between their strategy use and that of their continuing-generation peers was slightly wider for students taking science courses in secondary education than for students taking social sciences or humanities courses, likely due to the more formulaic and standardized nature of science courses in the Pakistani educational system, which may give students less prior experience in using flexible, self-directed planning behaviors associated with the metacognitive strategy subscale. This variation in the disciplinary context is a secondary theme which is linked to the primary theme of a generational comparison, but may be of interest to future research that focuses specifically on the academic and prior schooling context of the students to understand how the strategic disadvantage found in this study may vary depending on that context.

Another trend that emerged from the interviews had to do with the participants' description of the use of same-gender peer study groups as their primary compensatory group, compared to a description of mixed-gender online forums and digital communities as a secondary resource in addition to in-person peer networks, with the latter being more likely to be described by male participants and the former being more likely to be described by female participants. This qualitative pattern indicates that the type of compensatory peer strategies which first-generation students use may also be influenced by gender-specific social norms of acceptable peer relations within the broader context of the Pakistani university, which might be explored in future research with a larger and more gender-stratified sample.

5. Discussion

As this study demonstrated, the low level of cognitive and metacognitive strategy use among first-generation students directly supports the theoretical expectation, informed by the context of the larger first-generation student literature reviewed above, that the lack of family-academic behaviors, specifically, structure and planning-oriented approaches to language learning, would lead to measurable differences in strategy use between FGS and continuing-generation students. This finding complements Li, Liu, and Hu's (2023) observation that the first-generation students' lower relational and campus support does not just occur in the general attitudes towards motivation or academic adjustment but also in language learning strategy behavior.

The higher compensation and social strategy use among first-generation students, confirmed by the qualitative themes of peer reliance and active guessing and paraphrasing, show that these are not one-dimensional recipients of disadvantage, but active agents who make a strategic roadmap to English proficiency. This is a direct extension of the findings of Fareed, Jamal and Zai (2021) that peer feedback has a compensatory function for students of ESL with limited access to individualized instruction in the L2 class and this may be more salient for students from the first-generation who may not have the added benefit of family support when learning L2 that is provided by students from the continuing generation. Likewise, the participants' accounts of the extent of their self-directed use of digital media align with Rezaei, Soyoof, and Reynolds' (2024) findings on the significance of informal digital learning as an alternative route to English proficiency, building on this finding with the additional insight that the digital reliance of participants may serve as a way to compensate for the lack of language modeling from their families among first-generation students.

The psychological aspect of first-generation students' English language learning experience as revealed in this study, especially the pride and resilience attitudes adopted by most participants towards their self-taught development, is a valuable complement to Ahmed, Iqbal, Arshad, Qayyum, Alkhatib, Tarar, Mahmood, and Anwar (2026)'s observation that their students suffer significant psychological distress due to low proficiency in English. The participants of this study were generally past the acute language anxiety and sense of exclusion reported in the aforementioned phenomenological study, yet their explicit description of the transition from linguistic exclusion to compensatory competence suggests that the psychological trajectory of negotiating a sense of exclusion towards a sense of achievement and resilience may itself be a significant and underrecognized aspect of the broader university experience among first-generation students, with direct implications for the design of supporting programs for these

students that need not simply be remedial, but also build upon and reinforce the evidence of their own compensatory resourcefulness.

The findings of the present study are qualitative and directly and concretely illustrate this shift in the conceptualization of first-generation students documented by Fei, Kang, Sun, and Hu (2023) from deficit framings to asset-based recognitions of Pakistani students' adaptive resourcefulness, which is both parallel and equally salient as a pattern of the scholarship of first-generation students in recent times. First-generation students, therefore, must be seen as the subject of a compensatory capacity that has been demonstrated and not simply as a target for remedial interventions.

The quantitative and qualitative results of this study integrate to provide a consistent picture of how the distinct strategy profile of first-generation students emerges: When these students do not have the natural linguistic dispositions that continuing-generation students have acquired in the course of normal household socialization, they seem to replace them with effortful compensatory strategies acquired through the peer networks and self-directed digital engagement. The substitution pattern indicates that first-generation students are not just deficient in strategic sophistication; they are also taking a different strategic trajectory to achieve the same strategic target of becoming proficient in English, but a different kind of strategic trajectory – a more externally scaffolded one.

Finally, it is important to note that the cross-sectional design of this study measures the use of the compensatory strategy profile at one point in students' undergraduate education, and that the compensatory strategy profile measured in this study may change as students move from earlier to later years in study (outside of the influence of family support) and may consequently, more gradually, reduce the cognitive/metacognitive strategy gap found in this study. In a longitudinal extension of this study, the same cohort of first-generation students would be followed throughout their entire degree program to determine if it remains, decreases or increases even more as the students' progress into higher education.

6. Conclusion

The present study focused on the language learning strategies used by the university students from the Pakistani context as compared to the university students from the continuing generations, who are characterized in terms of language learning strategies as 'absent' language learning strategy and 'earned' language learning strategies in the form of actively developed compensatory strategies. The findings suggest that first-generation students report significantly lower use of cognitive and metacognitive strategies, consistent with a family learning behavior of less structured learning behaviors; and significantly higher use of compensation and social strategies, consistent with more flexible, active, and compensational engagement with networks and self-directed digital learning resources, a pattern supported by qualitative interviews highlighting the practicality of mechanisms and psychological strength of this compensatory strategy profile.

There are a number of limitations to this study. The sample was confined to one public sector university, and may not be representative of private universities or universities with varying student populations. Because an attitude of self-reported parental education was used throughout this literature to classify students as first-generation or continuing-generation, this method does not reflect the total complexity and diversity of family educational history that could be better described by qualitative family history data. Longitudinal study designs that would monitor the trajectory of the use of strategies over students' entire educational journey would be beneficial, as would be comparative studies to determine whether the strategy use gaps identified in this study can be quantifiably closed by targeted interventions in metacognitive strategy training, and research directly testing formalization and institutionalization of the peer based and digital compensatory strategies discussed in this study without compromising the resilience and autonomy with which first-generation students attribute their self-directed learning success.

This substitution process from a compensatory learning profile of first-generation students to the absence of embodied family linguistic capital also suggests an additional pathway for future research in institutional interventions: A formal peer mentoring program, created explicitly to substitute and extend the form of peer-based compensatory learning that first-generation students already engage in informally, could be incorporated into the official student support system without displacing peer networks or the resourcefulness and autonomy that these students already exhibit. The degree to which such formal programs bridge the cognitive and metacognitive strategy gap found in this study, while preserving the social and compensation strategy strengths that first-generation students

already possess, is an empirical question that currently needs to be determined empirically and that will be important for future research on strategies in the context of first-generation college students.

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