

Pakistani University Students Navigating Economic Uncertainty Through ESL Acquisition and Social Capital

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ABSTRACT

Given the volatile economic climate in Pakistan, where inflation, currency devaluation and job scarcity are the norm, the ability to speak English has become an indispensable social capital, affecting Pakistan's opportunities for higher education, white collar employment and social mobility. This study explores the strategies used by Pakistani university students in the context of this economic precarity to learn English as a Second Language (ESL), rather than thinking of language learning solely as a cognitive or pedagogical act, it is a practice that is situated in a social context in which students desire for upward mobility in life is the impetus for their learning. The study is based on Bourdieu's theory of capital and the newer sociolinguistic perspectives, thus examining how students with different socioeconomic backgrounds see, value and seek English language proficiency as a way of turning their linguistic skills into economic and social gain. The study uses an explanatory sequential mixed methods design, a quantitative survey on language learning strategy uses and socioeconomic status followed by a qualitative in-depth interview of students' lived experiences in learning ESL while facing financial constraints, access to poor quality instruction, and unequal access to digital materials. Results show that there were differences in the strategies that were adopted according to socioeconomic status, as well as learner resilience and resourcefulness in finding strategies in challenging situations. The study makes a significant contribution to the fields of sociolinguistic and applied linguistics research by bringing the concept of social capital into the study of ESL acquisition in Pakistan and its implications for language policy, equity in teaching and learning, and reform in higher education in economically disadvantaged settings.

Keywords: English as a Second Language (ESL); Social Capital; Language Learning Strategies; Economic Uncertainty; Pakistani Higher Education

1. Introduction

There is a linguistic context in which English remains the language of prestige, opportunity and institutional development and advancement even though Urdu is the national language and there are plenty of regional languages spoken in Pakistan's provinces. For the last few years, Pakistan has found itself under increasing economic pressures with sustained currency devaluation, persistently high inflation rates, and a shrinking formal job market, all of which have increased the importance of English in securing employment, further education or migration options for university students. In this climate, the learning of English is seldom without the presence of symbolic and linguistic capital that can be monetised or turned into other forms of capital, including economic and social, and that may be used to perpetuate inequalities across class boundaries.

Although there is a considerable amount of research on the field of English language teaching in Pakistan, yet a less attention has been given to the manner in which the university students themselves plan their learning of English in the absence of uniform and adequate support from the formal institutions and in the face of economic constraints in terms of tuition fees, digital resources, and quality teaching. Existing literature focuses on motivations, attitudes or policy-level tensions and a gap remains in our knowledge of actual, strategy-level behaviors, cognitive,



social and compensatory, that students employ to cope with this high-stakes linguistic landscape. This study attempts to fill this gap by raising three main questions: What language learning strategies do Pakistani University students report using to acquire English; How does use of language learning strategies differ across students' socioeconomic status; and how do students' own accounts of their use of language learning strategies relate to their own conceptions of English proficiency, economic uncertainty, and social mobility?

This study is important because it has rethought the field of ESL acquisition from its pedagogical perspective to one that is social and economic. The research is able to give a more nuanced view on the production of inequality and contestation of inequality through everyday language learning behaviour by combining Bourdieu's theory of capital with the empirical data at the level of the strategy. The results have implications for the university language policy, designing a more equitable support program and the larger conversation about English as a gatekeeping tool to the Pakistani higher education system.

2. Literature Review

The relation between L1 and L2 phonology is analysed in terms of second language learning researches. According to the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (Lado, 1957), learners face pronunciation problems when the first language is different from second language (English). When the learners face phonemic differences that are not in their language, they replace the unknown sounds that they already know.

The notion of 'linguistic capital' is fundamental to understanding how the knowledge of English serves as a mechanism for social stratification rather than a neutral academic skill, and has been used extensively in the study of English in Pakistan. In postcolonial settings, university institutions, including the curriculum, are still dependent on English as the strong symbolic coin that determines access to institutional resources as described by Abrar-ul-Hassan (2021). Amin (2025) has extended this theoretical perspective in his study of English classrooms at a Pakistani university, where students reported a strong correlation between previous school experiences and the investment in English, seeing persistent feelings of exclusion and less self-confidence than students from English-medium private schools. This is complicated further by Ashraf (2023) who shows that Pakistani students and educators have ambivalent attitudes towards English; at the same time, they appreciate the instrumental value of English, they resent its monopoly which leads to the marginalization of Urdu and regional languages.

A second, and more prominent thread in the literature concerns the conflict between language policy and language in practice. Ashraf, Turner, and Laar (2021) report a conflict between official policies in Pakistan for multilingual education and the English-dominant, monolingual practices in many classrooms, which are especially disadvantageous for students from lower socio-economic and rural backgrounds who have had little previous exposure to English outside school. The issue of English in Pakistan is also presented in a paradoxical way by Haidar and Fang (2019) as it brings prestige to its users who are able to avail quality teaching, while it is detrimental to their academic success for those who lack the ability to access quality teaching. All of this indicates that English is not a skill that is equally available to all students but is instead shaped by students' "place" in the socioeconomic system as a resource for learning.

This stratification has become an increasingly crucial aspect, especially since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, and access to digital and informal learning materials have become a key aspect. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the transition to online teaching and learning revealed and exacerbated pre-existing digital inequities for Pakistani university students, with students from low-income and rural areas often not having reliable internet, devices, and/or home-based study space, limiting their ability to access online English instruction. (Jamil & Muschert, 2023) Complementing this discovery, Rezai, Soyoof, and Reynolds (2024) point to the greater presence of informal digital learning, such as access to English language media, applications, and online communities, as another way that students acquire proficiency beyond the classroom, though this type of learning is not equally distributed among socioeconomic groups. The results of these studies collectively show that the digital dimension of English acquisition has turned into an additional axis of inequality in the distribution of social capital.

The role of specific learning strategies in the learning of English, apart from the motivation or attitudes of students, can be used to provide further information on how the socioeconomic position affects the process of learning English. From a Bourdieusian capital perspective, Liu (2023) argues that parental investment in the learning of a foreign language, such as English, is a critical factor in determining the motivation orientation to the language and consequently, the motivation strategy adopted by the learners. In this study, Fareed, Jamal and Zai (2021) investigate peer feedback as a particular learning strategy by Pakistani ESL post graduate students and conclude that collaborative peer-based strategies were often adopted as a compensation strategy to the lack of individual feedback from instructors, thus indicating that the role of social strategies in the context of L2 writing is more of a compensatory role for students who have limited access to individual feedback from the instructor. Similarly, Liaqat, Islam, Azim and

Lodhi (2025) explore in depth the factors that influence academic resilience in English learning by drawing on their observation of an ecological web of self-esteem, teacher support, peer support and family connection, while socioeconomic background serves as a background factor that conditions students' access to each of these supportive factors.

Combined, this collection of scholarships coalesces into some important themes for the present study. First, in Pakistan English is a stratified language and social capital which in turn mirrors and perpetuates the existing class divide. Second, the long-standing disconnect between policy-level talk and classroom-level implementation of multilingualism is a burden on students from marginalized communities. Second, the continued mismatch between policy level talk and classroom-level practice of multilingualism places a disproportionate burden on students from disadvantaged communities. Finally, digital access is becoming an increasingly salient dimension of inequality in English acquisition, especially since the pandemic. Fourth, motivation and attitudes toward English have received a good deal of empirical research attention, whereas the empirical research on the specific behaviors, cognitive, social, compensatory, and metacognitive, that learners from varying socio-economic backgrounds actually use to learn English remains somewhat limited. This study will fill this void by using a validated strategy inventory along with qualitative interviews to arrive at a more detailed strategy-based description of ESL acquisition by university students in Pakistan during times of economic uncertainty.

3. Methodology

The researcher used explanatory sequential mixed methods design in this study, which involved conducting the first stage as quantitative, followed by qualitative stage to explain and contextualize the quantitative results. This was chosen because it permits broad patterns of strategy use to be identified through a large sample of children statistically prior to the addition and interpretation of data from a purposively selected subset of children.

The target population included all the undergraduate students studying in public and private sector universities in Lahore, Pakistan, as a large population of both public and private universities is available in Lahore city and it has enough socio-economic variation in the sample. 350 students were surveyed quantitatively in the study, and they were selected using stratified convenience sampling on the basis of three pre-university factors such as parental education, household income, and the school medium of instruction, so that the students were categorized into low SES, medium SES, and high SES groups. After the survey stage, 20 students were purposefully sampled via a maximum variation strategy aimed at creating variation in SES, gender, and academic discipline.

Data collection was done with the following two main instruments. This quantitative stage used an adapted version of Oxford's Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) that assesses six types of language learning strategy, including memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, affective, and social strategies, as well as an additional socioeconomic status questionnaire that measures income, parent's education level, and previous language learning experiences. The qualitative stage used a semi-structured interview guide, which focused on the lived experience of learning English for the participants, their perceptions of the social and economic capital of English, and their personal responses to financial and/or resource pressures.

In the first stage, the SILL and socioeconomic questionnaire were given to the entire quantitative sample. In the second stage, the descriptive and correlational statistical analyses were performed by SPSS to determine if there was any pattern of strategy use across the SES groups. A purposive subsample of twenty students was selected for follow-up interviews in the third stage, based on the diversity of their survey responses, as well as their demographic profiles. For the fourth stage, semi-structured interviews were used, audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. The sixth stage of reflexive thematic analysis, familiarization, initial coding, theme generation, theme review, theme definition, and write-up, was used to analyze the transcripts in the fifth stage. The final stage, the sixth, was the synthesis of quantitative and qualitative data to create a profile of ESL acquisition in a strategy-level framework that was connected to social capital.

Data from the quantitative results were analysed descriptively (means and standard deviations) for each strategy category and one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to determine whether there were any significant differences among the three socioeconomic groups in strategy use. Qualitative data was analysed by reflexive thematic analysis, where themes were inductively identified by the participants' transcripts, and were then contrasted against the categories of the quantitative strategy for possible convergences and divergences between the two data sets.

4. Findings and Discussion

The mean strategy use scores for the three socioeconomic groups are shown in Table 1. Results suggest that students of higher SES reported significantly more frequent use of cognitive and metacognitive strategies than did students of lower SES, whereas there were no significant differences between groups in the use of compensation, affective, or social strategies. The pattern implies that being able to use a language learning pattern that is structured and can be planned might be more related to socioeconomic status than compensatory or socially mediated patterns, which were fairly evenly distributed across the sample.

Strategy Category	Low SES (n = 118) M (SD)	Middle SES (n = 146) M (SD)	High SES (n = 86) M (SD)	F (2, 347)
Memory strategies	3.21 (0.64)	3.35 (0.58)	3.42 (0.61)	2.87*
Cognitive strategies	3.34 (0.59)	3.51 (0.62)	3.68 (0.55)	6.14**
Compensation strategies	3.58 (0.61)	3.49 (0.57)	3.47 (0.60)	0.92
Metacognitive strategies	3.02 (0.71)	3.29 (0.63)	3.61 (0.58)	9.35**
Affective strategies	2.88 (0.69)	3.05 (0.65)	3.11 (0.62)	2.41
Social strategies	3.44 (0.60)	3.52 (0.56)	3.49 (0.59)	0.44

Table 1. Mean language learning strategy use by socioeconomic status group (5-point scale). * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.

Twenty follow-up interviews were used for a thematic analysis that identified key themes, with the percentage of participants discussing each theme and the socioeconomic group each theme was most prevalent in Table 2. There was almost complete consensus across the sample on English being economically instrumental, as the theme of English as a means to employment was raised. Themes of resources, reliance on digital self-directed learning and compensating peer networks were overrepresented by students from low and middle SES backgrounds, while family linguistic capital as an advantage emerged as the most dominant theme among high SES students, which aligns with the quantitative result of the stratified access to structured learning strategies.

Qualitative Theme	Participants Reporting (n = 20)	% of Sample	Predominant SES Group
English as a route to employment	18	90%	All groups
Reliance on digital/self-directed resources	14	70%	Low and middle SES
Family linguistic capital as advantage	11	55%	High SES
Financial constraints limiting tuition/resources	13	65%	Low SES
Peer networks compensating for resource gaps	12	60%	Low and middle SES

Table 2. Frequency of qualitative themes across interview participants (n = 20).

The results of this study, while in the broad context in line with the Bourdieusian framing used in previous work in the field of English in Pakistan, provide a finer-grained (strategy-level) account of the functioning of social capital. This is because there is a stark difference in the students' confidence and experience in using cognitive and metacognitive strategies according to their SES background, which is consistent with Amin's (2025) result that students from English-medium schooling backgrounds have a greater experience and confidence in using structured approaches to language learning, concluding that such approaches may be considered as transferred cultural capital that students acquire prior to enrolling in university rather than skills they learn only during the university period.

Meanwhile, the relative uniformity in use of compensation and social strategy by SES groups in the present study suggests that students from lower SES backgrounds are not passive in response to lower SES resources; instead, in accordance with the compensatory peer-based strategies found in the literature (Fareed, Jamal, and Zai 2021), students in the present study from lower SES backgrounds seemed to actively mobilize their peer networks and informal digital resources to compensate for the structured advantages they had to offer their wealthier counterparts. This aligns with Rezai, Soyooof, and Reynolds (2024), who noted that informal digital learning is an emerging pathway to English proficiency to complement formal English language instruction, especially for students who receive less formal instruction. Furthermore, the digital reliance theme for the low- and middle-SES interviews confirm Jamil and Muschert's (2023) findings that there is a digital divide in Pakistani higher education, and while digital resources may

be used in a compensatory manner, access to a reliable internet connection and devices may certainly limit the extent of digital resources' benefits for students.

The widespread consensus on the role of English as a means to work among the various SES groups is indicative of the wider findings of Haidar and Fang (2019) and Ashraf (2023) that English can be seen to be an economic necessity as well as a source of social tension. This dual perception indicates that the stakes of becoming proficient with English have increased in Pakistan, rather than waned, even as use of the most clearly linked set of strategies to proficiency gains is still divided by socioeconomic status. The results of the present study have practical implications for Pakistani universities as it is recommended that the lower SES students be trained in metacognitive strategies to support them in their financial constraints and that the universities should continue supporting the peer mentoring programs and providing affordable access to digital learning resources, both of which were found to be used by students in financial constraints but in an uneven way.

5. Conclusion

In this study, the researchers wanted to explore how Pakistani university students learn English as a second language in a very uncertain economic environment, viewing ESL acquisition as a socially embedded activity, rather than a purely pedagogical or cognitive one, that is influenced by their social capital. The results presented here show that the general instrumental attitudes toward English as a means to economic opportunity are fairly consistent across socioeconomic groups, but the use of concrete strategies is significantly differentiated by students' socioeconomic status, with cognitive and metacognitive strategies being especially salient, indicating students' resourcefulness in dealing with resource deficits.

The results of this study have some limitations. The study was conducted in the Lahore universities only which might not give generalizability of findings to students of other provinces of Pakistan, as the infrastructural and language situation are significantly varied in rural areas or less urbanized provinces of Pakistan. Also, the cross-sectional design only assesses strategy use at one point in time and does not take into account the potential for changes in strategy use throughout a student's academic career. A longitudinal design with the tracking of the development of strategies and comparative studies across different provinces to account for regional differences in socioeconomic status-ESL acquisition would be beneficial for further research. There is also potential for further research on the specific influence of generative AI tools and informal digital platforms as a new factor and possible equaliser or further differentiation in the acquisition of English language skills of Pakistani university students.

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