

BRIDGING THE GAP: “LEVERAGING AI IN ELT TO ENHANCE UNIVERSITY ENROLLMENT AMONG GEN Z AND UNDERPRIVILEGED COMMUNITIES”

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study utilizes the Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge (TPACK) framework to investigate the integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in English Language Teaching (ELT) within resource-limited universities in Central Punjab, Pakistan. Drawing on semi-structured interviews and focus groups with Gen Z English students and ELT practitioners, the findings reveal that while AI enhances language learning and reduces instructional burdens, over-reliance risks eroding vital human traits such as creativity, critical thinking, and intellectual autonomy. Furthermore, the research dispels the myth of universal Gen Z tech-savviness, noting that marginalized and rural students frequently lack basic digital literacy, thereby necessitating structured AI literacy training before classroom implementation. The study also identifies a decline in higher education enrollments driven by a mismatch between traditional university curricula and market demands for digital competencies and soft skills. To remedy this, the authors advocate for urgent, inclusive curricular reforms that embed market-driven courses like AI, SEO, and digital marketing into English programs. Ultimately, the study concludes that AI should supplement rather than replace human-centric instruction, offering a scalable framework for policy-making in regions facing similar technological and infrastructural constraints.

INTRODUCTION:

Thousands of years of teaching knowledge and experience have been transformed completely with the sudden entry of Artificial Intelligence (AI) into the education and ELT has been one of these. Pedagogical processes with the advancement of technology have changed the expectations of any university learners, particularly the members of the Generation Z generation. These are the students, who sometimes grow up in the atmosphere of the digital environment since the childhood, so in this way, they have advantage in the interactive environment supported by technologies with the major focus on the immediacy, self-tailored environment and the continuous association (Stern, 2023). However, application of AI into ELT in developing countries such as Pakistan and other South Asia and Africa countries has special barriers. Such problems are brought about by infrastructural gaps, socio-economic factors and cultural differences that prevent incorporation of AI tools in a classroom context in a manner that is effective (Ali & Ullah, 2022).

The aging of higher education is also an urgent issue especially in such directions as humanities and sciences with a continuous shrinking of the university enrolments. This may be blamed on the increase of the gap between what the academic curricula teach and what is demanded in terms of experience by the host working world as more and more employers prefer a graduate with digital competency, problem-solving skills and an understanding of AI technologies (World Economic Forum 2023). For many developing countries, however, universities are still kept back by its inability to adapt to change. teachers do not have the required technical skills; specialized knowledge cannot be used in the formal learning process. This results in graduates that face a desperate lack of technical preparation for modern workplace demands, aside from such issues as unemployment and underemployment The incorporation of AI in the composition of the ELT learning curricula is therefore of eminent importance but to support this, the training modules for both the teachers and the students have to be legion to equip them to the barest minimum both in terms of ethically and effectively using such technologies. (Holmes et al., 2021)

The subject whether AI can replace the duties of teachers in human form is a very controversial subject, and it is a very popular topic and not a few are also making predictions that the AI will make human teachers and doctors as obsolete in the next decade (CNBC, 2025). Such pronouncements though may signal the phenomenal strides being taken in AI technology, do not consider the genuine educational situations of countries having poor technological infrastructures. Besides, experts against high levels of reliance of AI on the fact that the life-defining human factors of creativity, empathy, and critical thinking still hold a progressively critical position in education and careers (West, 2023).

In Pakistan, there are still numerous of our educational systems that use outdated academic curricula which do not capture the changes presented by the modern jobs market. These traditional programs lack a lot of incorporation of current technologies, skills that relate to the real world and innovative learning ventures. Consequently, graduates are left ill-prepared to cope with the real-world professional demands or deliver the standard required by advanced pursue of academic learning. (Waqar Mahmood Khan, Shakeel, & Khan 2024)

It should also be noted that not all Gen Z learners belong to a digitally literate urban profile. In Pakistan, multiple students from the rural or poorer section lack access to high-end AI tools and hence they can only fall short of being fully involved with the AI enhanced classes literally. As a result, educational policies need to fit the disparities to make technology integration in education inclusive, equitable, and contextual (Iqbal & Habib 2023).

In the present study, the perceptions of ELT practitioners and university students from Pakistan particularly from rural and underprivileged areas on opportunities and challenges of adopting AI in ELT are discussed. According to Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge (TPACK) framework this research demands an effective approach where the use of AI makes teaching practices of humans better, but not replaces them making teachers' creatively and critically thinking preserved for future specialists. (Mishra & Koehler, 2006)

LITERATURE REVIEW

Turner (2021) says that the digitalization of education continuously now makes the pressing question of introducing AI in ELT, since students accustom to being surrounded by technology, namely Generation Z kids, want the "smart" learning environment where it is possible to receive real-time feedback and interact with everything

Selwyn (2019) says that in any case, scholars note that it is worthwhile to bear in mind while discussing AI, that it may also improve the efficiency of education, but it should be implemented carefully with regard to the socio-economic and infrastructural asymmetries that may exist especially among the poor countries (According to Luckin (2018) ELT artificial intelligence resources support differentiated teaching, promote high-quality feedback, and elevate the teacher's job (Li et al., 2022). On the contrary, if technology is applied to an extreme, then it is possible that people would fail to engage important soft skills, like critical thinking and leadership, and social communication, which are essential for progress in both careers and society.

The best role of AI in ELT is to supplement, not to replace, this traditional teaching that caters to these skills. Also, a fall in university students, particularly humanities and science majors, is characterized by disconnection between curricula and job needs. Currently, employers rank among the things that graduates can demonstrate like digital skills, problem-solving facilitated by technology and proficiency in AI literacy, according to the World Economic Forum (2023). It is commonly agreed that AI should be incorporated into the coursework for ELT, although scholars argue that students require the basics of ethical use of AI to overcome pitfalls like misinformation, and academic dishonesty to follow the advice of Holmes et al. (2021).

Shamim & Rasool (2022) stated that there is a glaring difference between urban and rural school technology in Pakistan, which prevents AI-based teaching introduction in English

language instruction (ELT). Scholars emphasize that the local contexts should be taken into consideration for the AI applications to be effective in the classrooms. If for some reason researchers happen to find so, this method is likely to increase the existing inequalities in education. Appropriate integration can be attained where relevant technology is made available, and where education policies are culturally-sensitive, and that support students from different regions in participating.

This continuing problem is reflected in the continued shortage of highly skilled teachers and well-prepared students who can meet the digital needs of the fast-changing, modern workforce. Universities' curricula need to be renewed more than ever before, in order to give priority to the development of these skills, especially as the market for AI and digital expertise is growing rapidly.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:

In this study, a qualitative approach was selected and underpinnings provided by TPACK (Mishra & Koehler, 2006), which is a framework. This research aimed at exploring how learners and practitioners view the use of AI tools in the teaching of English language to Generation Z students in underserved regions. The role of combining knowledge of technology, pedagogy and content to make utmost use of technology in the classroom is emphasized by the TPACK framework.

POPULATION:

The participants of the study were selected from the following groups within the Central Punjab region/universities of Pakistan:

- **BS English students and those who are placed in the M. Phil/MS English streams:** Such learners were selected on the basis of their active participation in English language education as well as predominance of their being a part of Generation Z population as this group forms the purpose of study.
- **Teachers and professors who participated in the English Language Teaching (ELT) at universities:** Furthermore, the study involves Lecturers and Assistant Professors who teach English and ELT related classes in tertiary institutions of learning, public or private.

SAMPLING TECHNIQUE:

The current study used purposive sampling technique to determine participants who met criteria relevant to AI integration in ELT. Candidates were chosen under the following conditions:

Participants chosen for the study carried out their own work with AI tools or they were interested in involving them in their teaching practice.

- **Affiliation with under-resourced institutions:** Participation was specifically targeted at institutions that are in economically marginalized areas, those with technological limitations, thereby enabling the study to emphasize the difference in technological tools accessing. The final sample included:
 - 20 undergraduates and postgraduates from universities specializing in English.
 - TEN lecturers and assistant professors in ELT.

DATA COLLECTION TOOLS:

To get a complete picture of the issue, the study used these qualitative procedures:

- **Semi-structured interviews with ELT faculty:** Participants were provided with both an opportunity and a platform to express their feelings and fears with respect to the integration of AI into learning spaces.
- **Focus group discussions with students:** Students were granted an opportunity to share their views about AI-supported learning as well as most appropriate ways of integrating technological tools to their learning.

LIMITATIONS:

- **Geographical focus:** The scope of the research was limited to central Punjab and may therefore have missed out on the range of trends, or hardships existing elsewhere in Pakistan.
- **Sample size:** The study was threatened by time and material constraints, and therefore a small sample yielding to limited generalization.
- **Focus on English language programs:** The research focused purely on English and ELT courses while overlooking the possible differences in results due to possible AI integration use in other subject domains.

DELIMITATIONS:

- **Targeting underprivileged institutions:** Targeting students and practitioners from low-resource and technologically underprivileged calibration universities in Central Punjab, the study aimed at presenting a more refined view on the issue they face.
- The study selected AI applications specifically designed for the purposes of learning language. The study focused only on looking at AI tools that were specifically designed for language teaching, rather than more general AI systems.
- **Regional scope:** In the perimeter of the Central Punjab, the study maintained contextual congruence inherent in the selected location. It was with this limited scope in mind that the research sought to be contained and contextualized.

DATA ANALYSIS:

Systematic analysis of the data collected from interviews with ELT faculty and focus groups of students was conducted using thematic methods. By pointing out recurring patterns, similarities and differences, the research objectives were more easily met. The perspectives of research participants were carefully categorized under thematic categories with help of manual coding to allow for the easy strains of recurring ideas from data. Main themes discussed were technological readiness, benefits that the students found in incorporating AI, barriers to AI adoption, and how teaching and learning delivery have changed.

Faculty consensus showed that many instructors had an understanding that AI is an instrument that could potentially be used to foster personal learning, simplify assessment procedures, and provide real-life language experiences. Even though the potential of AI was recognized, employees repeatedly blamed institutional challenges, lack of continuous training, inability to obtain stable internet access and stable technological equipment as major concerns.

The majority of students expressed support for AI in learning, but emphasized that trainer led training and support were essential elements. It became evident from the reactions that the role of automated tools such as chatbots and learning programs was justified, but the presence of learned instructors could not be substituted.

Student discussions revealed that a great deal of participants was unaware of contemporary digital acronyms, like SEO, and inquiring about the implementation of these abilities into English studies curriculum. This shows how disconnected students are to contemporary industry needs and implies the need for academia to reconsider its views and educational aims so as to teach fundamental digital competencies of the modern time.

FINDINGS:

- **Technological Preparedness:** From the responses, it was revealed that both students and faculty participants exhibited differences in familiarity with AI tools. Most students indicated enthusiasm for learning using AI, but the faculty highlighted the need for prior formal training in AI tools that could be used in teaching and learning English. In the focus groups, multiple students lacked knowledge of central digital ideas which include SEO and Digital Marketing and even wondered how these ideas were relevant to an English studies program. This

feedback highlighted a severe digital inclination gap among students, necessitating the integration of 21st-century digital competency skills into curriculums of language studies.

- **Perceived Advantages:** Users identified AI as a tool for promoting learner independence, personalized form of feedback, and increased exposure to varying linguistic resources. Respondents had a very positive view of AI use for grammar correction, improving pronunciation and providing immersive learning experiences.
- **Barriers to Integration:** Practitioners tended to raise concerns on the lack of enough resources in terms of technology, reduced internet reliability, lack of access to new devices, and lack of support to integrate technology in the institution. There was concern among the faculty that the overuse of technology might weaken critical thinking and could dilute the importance of an open connection among students in the classroom.
- **Pedagogical Evolution:** Numerous educators were trying out methods of using technology to augment instructions, but mostly on an ad hoc basis. However, narrow understandings on how to systematically integrate AI into curricula was scarce leading to fragmented implementation.

CONCLUSION:

Although Gen Z learners are very enthusiastic and ELT practitioners are cautious optimistic to integrate AI, systematic problems are adroitly hindering their successful implementation in marginalized regions. A shortage of institutional support on both the design of digital tools and improvement of teachers' skills only exacerbates the digital educational divide. The glaring lack of digital literacy basics in the form of skills like SEO, AI, and digital marketing among students reflects a significant gap between what is taught in the academe and the skills sought for ones that fill the boards. These results emphasize the necessity to add digital literacy to curricula that are already being used as an essential aspect of English teaching. AI has advantages to be had in ELT but does not replicate the complexity and compassionate methodology that teachers bring in contexts of significant linguistic and socio-economic barriers. The existing decline in university enrolment, especially in such disciplines as sciences and humanities, signifies a constantly growing gap between the traditional programs of training and the inexorably pragmatic, technology-savvy, and profession-oriented requirements of Gen Z students. Although the English programs' durability is not under consideration, they will only remain relevant if they actively include such subjects as AI, SEO, Digital Marketing and digital communication in their course catalog. Young people, regardless of background, are more cognizant of the need for digital literacy, and that is forcing educational institutions to provide more programs which are geared towards more modern work force. As a result, failing to adapt programs may widen the skills gap and negatively affect the attractiveness of educational institutions for potential students. To change this direction, the educational institutions should embrace updates to the curriculum which mingles fundamentals academic issues with the most modern technological instruments, providing them in an equitable and culturally sensitive manner. With that, universities would do well to enhance participation and confidence in the institution, and ensure some graduates are ready both in cognitive areas as well as the market place.

As AI tools assume a deeper place in academic settings, researchers will be able to see the increasing influence on the level of student engagement with English literature. While such tools are excellent in simplifying academic procedures and serving purposes related to numerous tasks, questions are arising as to how they may undermine the ability of students to think independently and creatively, solve problems. Excessive exploitation of AI may limit

how the students increase their capacity for independent, creative and critical thinking. Finally, it is inherently important to guarantee that the technological support is supplemented with measures aimed at improving the human cognitive abilities (Khan, 2024). Based on international experience, especially on Sweden's recent shift to lower classroom technology after years of running its course, deliberate and measured digital integrations strategies in ELT are directed. Swedish authorities found student learning benefited from classroom interaction compared to technological teaching tools which contributed to the revival of traditional teaching patterns after a decline in reading comprehension and academic performance (Cano, 2024). It further contributes to the Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge (TPACK) paradigm by indicating the necessity of context specific and equilibrium oriented integration of content, pedagogy and technology. Integration of AI into ELT requires careful consideration in order to use technology collaboratively with human teaching methods.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

Based on the analysis of the study's results, the authors make the following proposals.

- **Develop Institutional Support Structures:** Universities and colleges in sub-developed areas should enhance their resource technology base and faculty development opportunities to support AI tool integration in ELT classrooms.
- **Make Infusing AI into Place Teacher Training Front and Center:** It is necessary to support ELT professionals to build expertise to be able to easily integrate AI tools with conventional pedagogical practices while retaining the critical human element of education.
- Come up with guidelines about AI usage of students that complement the students with technology and personal contact. Education organizations should develop AI implementation strategies that strongly underline the value of human interaction while using digital resources just like Sweden does in cautioning people against technology overload.
- The AI response tools should be customized in order to address the specific needs, cultures, languages, and socioeconomic climates of pupils in impoverished states, rather than employing a one-size-fits-all solution for students.
- Arming students with digital skills at the cutting-edge era integrate them into the syllabus. Rewriting the syllabus for the English degree should involve essential digital skills like learning SEO, graphic design, building content, visualization of data, digital marketing, freelancing opportunities, as well as basic levels of AI literacy. Adoption of these competencies in the syllabus improves students' readiness for work and cuts their classroom accomplishments with actual employment options.
- **Conduct Longitudinal Evaluations:** Continuous observation of the influence of AI on language learning helps schools ensure that they don't let technology in when it doesn't enhance teaching but is integral to interactive components rather than replace them.
- **Promote Ethical Awareness Among:** Learners and Teachers: Propaganda of AI literacy should involve educating participants about such ethical considerations as data security and proper usage of AI technology to make them into clever digital users.

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