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Digital Inequality in GenAI tools utilized in EFL Learning contexts: Insights from Indonesian University Students

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Abstract

This study examines potential digital divides resulting from disparities between free and premium access to GenAI platforms among EFL students. Using a mixed-methods approach, data were collected through questionnaires consisting of Likert-scale and open-ended questions completed by 126 participants. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics and independent-samples t-tests, while qualitative responses were analysed thematically. Independent-samples t-tests found no statistically significant differences between the two access groups on any of the five variables (all p>.05), though small-to-moderate effect sizes emerged for AI usage (d = 0.42) and access perception (d = -0.45), suggesting students with both free and premium access tend to use GenAI tools somewhat more frequently, while free-only users tend to be more sensitive to access limitations. Effect sizes for perceived learning impact, fairness, and awareness of global inequality were negligible. Qualitative findings further indicate that effective GenAI use depends on prompting skills, critical thinking, and institutional guidance on ethical AI use and AI literacy training.

1. Introduction

The surge in AI integration in teaching, particularly in second language (L2) learning, is undeniable. Matjie et al. (2026) argue that AI can lead to both intentional and unintentional digital divide despite its benefits. Among some benefits of AI use in the EFL (English as a Foreign Language) writing context are the improvement of learners' autonomy, increased proficiency levels, increased levels of motivation, and easier access to personalized feedback (Andreou & Christani, 2025). A study by Torres and Kahveci (2025) reveals that students used AI tools across language skills, but most frequently in writing tasks such as grammar checking, structuring ideas, and reviewing references.

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These benefits encourage the adoption of various types of Generative AI (GenAI) tools by both students and teachers in EFL classrooms. For instance, in the study conducted by Munawaroh (2024), the use of AI tools like ChatGPT, Grammarly, and QuillBot in EFL classrooms in Indonesia is linked to students' increase of writing fluency and their reduced anxiety, while also raising concerns about potential over-dependence and students' work authenticity. In the diverse learning context, as in Indonesia, where learning preferences and circumstances might vary, EFL students generally preferred ChatGPT for the AI assistant, both in a single use or combined with other tools such as Gemini, Grammarly, Perplexity, etc (Rosyada & Taopan, 2025).

While various AI tools are available for free on the internet, not all students have equal access to adequate educational technology. These concerns emerged and were widely observed during the shift toward distance learning that occurred with the onset of the Covid19 pandemic. It was reported that students, mostly those in rural areas, lack internet connectivity and access to digital learning tools that can support remote learning (Quicksand Design Studio Pvt. Ltd., 2021). Such digital inequalities are not subject to only the Indonesian context. Ali, Zainodin, and Mahamad (2024) reported that Malaysian low-income students similarly encountered some major COVID-19-induced challenges, including a lack of technology, poor internet connection, and communication barriers. Another issue arising from the use of GenAI in the learning process is the disparity in access types, particularly between free and premium services.

While cognitive and affective factors have been shown to influence students' engagement with GenAI in learning (Zhou, 2025), few studies have examined how learners' awareness and adoption of technology shape their perceptions of these tools and their impact on learning outcomes. As noted by Andreou and Christani (2025), inequalities in students' access to technology, caused by variations in financial capacity, cultural constraints, and geographical conditions, may lead to differences in learning outcomes.

However, research on educational purposes of GenAI has largely focused on its adoption, use, and effectiveness, while paying limited attention to how such access inequalities, particularly in Global South contexts, shape learners' experiences and outcomes (Dobinson et al., 2024). Due to the gaps and challenges within accessibility encountered by students in using GenAI tools to support their learning, there is a need for more inclusive, well-informed, and context-sensitive institutional strategies for integrating GenAI in higher education (Chung et al., 2026). Despite the urgency, there remains a lack of empirical studies addressing these gaps, for instance, investigating how differences in access to free versus premium GenAI tools shape learners' experiences, engagement, and learning outcomes.

GenAI tools adoption by EFL Learners

The adoption of GenAI, as demonstrated by the previous studies and literature (Dou Abdelbasset et al., 2025; Li & Ding, 2025; Tiandem-Adamou, 2025; Yang et al., 2025), has strong potential to enhance EFL learning, particularly in writing skills, motivation, and engagement, even though its effectiveness depends on psychological, behavioural, and contextual factors. The study by Tiandem-Adamou (2025), conducted in English-medium instruction (EMI) universities in China, reveals that the use of GenAI tools is associated with significant improvements in students' writing performance, with peer collaboration and AI-driven personalized feedback identified as key contributing factors.

Despite the prominent role of feedback in the effectiveness of GenAI adoption in learning, students may encounter various challenges in receiving and utilizing such feedback. As noted by Yang et al. (2025), these challenges include inconsistency, difficulties in understanding and applying feedback due to language barriers, and the risk of misleading or inaccurate outputs.

Another important aspect related to GenAI-integrated learning is learner autonomy. (Agustini, 2023; Zhang et al., 2026). Agustini's (2023) investigation of the role of ChatGPT and its relevance to the Indonesian higher education curriculum emphasises the GenAI tools' ability to provide personalized language learning, which can support students based on their needs and learning styles, therefore promoting autonomy in language learning. Findings by Zhang et al. (2026) indicate that autonomy significantly influences learners' continued intention and actual use of GenAI. Additionally, GenAI tools offer a powerful, personalized feedback which supports learner autonomy (Dou Abdelbasset et al., 2025). These findings suggest that the adoption of GenAI tools may interact with learner autonomy, thereby enhancing students' engagement in learning.

While the integration of GenAI tools in learning is found to be efficacious, enhancing learner autonomy and linguistic accuracy, there is a need to address the risk of overreliance as pointed out in some studies. An extensive literature study conducted by Luo and Chen (2025) in the EFL education context underlines the effectiveness of GenAI tools in language acquisition while also noting the challenges, including the validity of information provided by AI, academic integrity issues, and overdependency.

Among the issues, the most subtle problem in the technology adoption in learning is learners' increased reliance as they engage with the GenAI tools. Students engaging with GenAI tools might perceive enjoyable learning, but at the same time, this interaction in the long term might pose a risk of developing over-reliance on the technology and the possible erosion of their critical thinking abilities (Yin et al., 2025). In this regard, educational institutions and practitioners need to address the issues seriously by implementing a balanced approach, establishing effective frameworks and clear guidelines to minimize the negative impact (H. F. Ali & Mohammed, 2024). This is because it is impossible to totally avoid the existence of GenAI, so we must maximize its potential and minimize the risks.

The rapid development of GenAI tools, such as ChatGPT and Gemini, has led to their increasing adoption in educational contexts, with certain applications gaining popularity among students. In the field of EFL learning, ChatGPT has attracted considerable attention due to its relevance for L2 learning and has become a central focus in recent studies (Agustini, 2023; Alzubi et al., 2025; Dwivedi et al., 2023; Fitria, 2023; Werdiningsih et al., 2024; Yuan et al., 2024). Werdiningsih et al. (2024) suggest that ChatGPT has the potential to transform EFL instruction by functioning as an adaptable cognitive tool that aligns with diverse pedagogical approaches and stages of cognitive development. Similarly, Luo and Chen (2025) note that research on the integration of GenAI in EFL not only explores the capabilities of tools such as ChatGPT but also evaluates their practical effects on students' learning.

Nevertheless, as with any emerging technology, it is important to consider both its benefits and associated challenges, as studies increasingly highlight the complexities involved in the integration and acceptance of GenAI in educational settings. The acceptance of GenAI among EFL learners is influenced by multiple factors that shape their ability to effectively utilize the technology and maximize learning outcomes. A study by Wang et al. (2024) reveals that acceptance is strongly associated with students' technological self-efficacy, suggesting that learners with higher self-efficacy demonstrate greater motivation and engagement in adopting and using such technologies.

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Digital Inequality in Education

The integration of GenAI in language classrooms raises significant concerns regarding digital inequality. As noted by Luo and Chen (2025), current research highlights key challenges such as academic integrity and the digital divide. Many GenAI tools operate on subscription-based models, making advanced features inaccessible to some learners. As a result, requiring their use in educational settings may disadvantage students who cannot afford them. Yuan et al. (2024) describe this phenomenon as a form of digital divide that can lead to digital bias, where students' financial capacity influences the quality of their learning experience.

The disparities in access to GenAI tools manifest at both the classroom and global levels. At the classroom level, although GenAI is widely adopted for its benefits, it also introduces concerns related to overreliance, diminished critical thinking, accuracy, and intellectual property. Additionally, students' perceptions and engagement with GenAI vary according to factors such as gender, academic specialization, and level of study (Alzubi et al., 2025), suggesting that access and engagement with GenAI vary among students.

At the global level, inequalities between the Global North and the Global South become more pronounced. The high cost of AI technologies risks exacerbating existing disparities in language education resources across regions (Dobinson et al., 2024). Furthermore, the integration of GenAI without sufficient cultural awareness may lead to unintended forms of recolonization in EFL classrooms. AI-generated content may reinforce "native-speakerism" while underrepresenting local cultures and perspectives (Stewart & Zheng, 2024).

At the same time, GenAI holds potential to reduce inequality and democratize access to learning, particularly in the Global South. For instance, it can provide personalized, up-to-date learning materials, support diverse learner needs, and facilitate cross-cultural communication (Tafazoli, 2024). Some scholars even argue that GenAI could help mitigate ideological biases and expand educational opportunities (Zou et al., 2026).

However, realizing these benefits requires careful and context-sensitive integration. As emphasized by Yuan et al. (2024), educators and researchers must address the limitations of GenAI to avoid reinforcing existing inequalities and biases. This includes considering learners' socio-economic backgrounds, cultural contexts, and individual experiences. Therefore, further research is needed to examine how GenAI can be implemented effectively among EFL learners in higher education, particularly across diverse proficiency levels and socio-economic conditions.

Building on this gap, this study aims to examine access, usage, and the impact of AI tools on EFL learning among Indonesian university students. Specifically, it investigates how different levels of access, namely free and premium versions, shape learners' usage patterns, including frequency and purposes, as well as their impact on learning. Within the Indonesian context, diverse socio-economic backgrounds and differences in individual capacity, such as financial resources and digital literacy, may create inequalities in students' access to AI tools, potentially reinforcing existing gaps in learning opportunities.

Unlike prior studies that treat GenAI access as a binary adopted/not-adopted issue, this study offers novel empirical evidence by directly comparing free-only and free-plus-premium users on the same set of usage, impact, fairness, and global-inequality measures within an Indonesian EFL setting, combining statistical comparison with students' own accounts of their experience. To address this issue, this study seeks to answer the following research questions.

1. What GenAI tools are used by EFL students?
2. How does access to these GenAI tools (free vs. premium) vary among students?
3. How do AI usage patterns, perceptions of learning impact, and perceptions of access and fairness differ between students with free-only access and those with both free and premium access?

2. Method

Research design

This study employs a mixed-method design by collecting both descriptive quantitative and qualitative data using a questionnaire. The quantitative data were analysed first to examine the number of students who are using paid or free GenAI tool services. The study also investigated the pattern of use and students' perceptions of GenAI tools, comparing free-only and free-plus-premium users to address the third research question. Qualitative data were analysed thematically to explain and contextualise these quantitative differences.

Participants

Participants were recruited using convenience sampling. A total of 126 university EFL students, majoring in English Education and English Language and Literature programs from two universities in Makassar, took part in the study. All participants were students taught by the researchers and were invited to complete the questionnaire voluntarily. Before data collection, the researchers explained the objective of the project and obtained participants' informed consent, emphasizing that participation was voluntary and would have no bearing on their course marks or grades. Participants were contacted through their class WhatsApp group or completed the questionnaire in the classroom after class hours.

Instruments

This study employed a questionnaire in a Google Form completed online by the participant. The estimated time for completion is 10-15 minutes. The questionnaire consists of seven sections, as follows:

a. Basic details, including gender, semester, their access, and what AI tools they use
b. How students use AI for learning English (AI Usage)
c. Differences between free and premium AI access (Access)
d. How AI affects learning and confidence (Impact)
e. Opinions about equal access to AI (Fairness)
f. Inequality of AI access worldwide (Global inequality)
g. Personal experiences and opinions

The questionnaire items were developed and reviewed by the researchers for content clarity and for ensuring the relevance to the Indonesian EFL context before distribution. Cronbach's alpha test was run on the Likert-scale sections, in which the result is presented as follows:

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Table 1. Reliability Analysis

Scale Reliability Statistics			
	Mean	SD	Cronbach's α
scale	3.49	0.426	0.797

The result of reliability test indicates that the internal consistency of items in the questionnaire falls into acceptable category (Cronbach's α= .797). According to George and Mallery (2020), the values above .70 are considered acceptable, suggesting that the items were sufficiently consistent in measuring the intended construct.

Data analysis

The data in this study were analysed in two parts. First, the Likert-scale responses were analysed quantitatively. The proportion of students using specific GenAI tools and their types of access were presented as percentages. Data related to usage, learning impact, access, and equality were compared and analysed using descriptive statistics to identify overall trends in students' responses. In addition, an independent samples t-test was conducted to compare students' usage and perceptions based on their type of access to GenAI (free vs. paid). Cohen's d was calculated to determine the effect size.

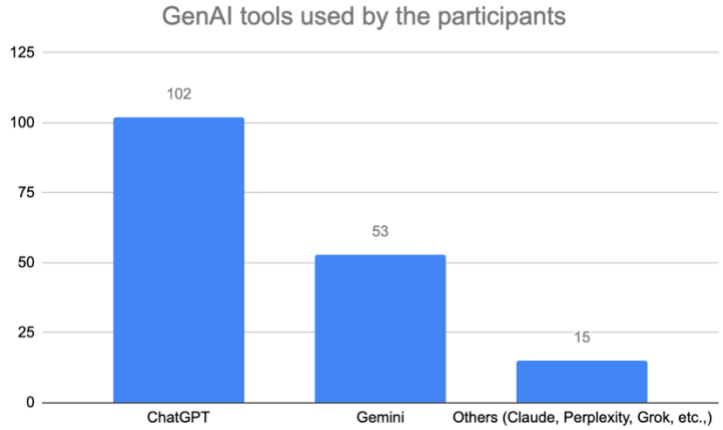
For the qualitative analysis, students' written responses to the open-ended questions were coded to identify recurring ideas, such as "inaccuracy" and "limited access." These codes were then grouped into broader themes, including accuracy issues, access inequality, and over-reliance. The emerging patterns were interpreted and linked to the quantitative findings.

3. Results

AI usage patterns

The surge of GenAI integration has been observed in many aspects of life, including education. Many students have adopted GenAI tools to support their learning and academic activities. In this study, respondents were allowed to select more than one GenAI tool, as students often use multiple platforms for different academic purposes.

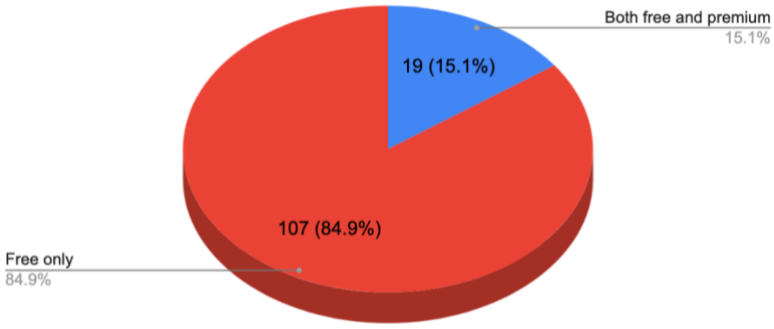
Figure 1. Types of Generative AI tools used by students (N = 126)



As shown in Figure 1, ChatGPT and Gemini are the most used GenAI platforms among the students. Of the 126 respondents, 102 reported using ChatGPT, while 53 indicated that they use Gemini. ChatGPT is a model developed by OpenAI that can interact in a conversational way and answer follow-up questions, admit its mistakes, challenge incorrect premises, and reject inappropriate requests ("Introducing ChatGPT," 2022). Similarly,

GeminiAI, developed by Google, is widely utilized by a significant number of students. In contrast, other GenAI tools, including Claude, Perplexity, Grok, DeepL, and DeepSeek, were reported by only a small number of respondents.

Figure 2. Types of access (free only vs. both free and premium)



Access inequality

A vast majority of the students using GenAI tools (84.9%) reported relying exclusively on free versions, while only a small minority (15.1%) had access to premium services in addition to free platforms (See Figure 2). This pattern suggests a potential inequality in access to AI-supported learning resources. Interestingly, even students who had experience with premium services still perceived subscription costs as a burden. For instance, Student A03 noted that, "free access covers only the basics, whilst premium access is comprehensive but expensive; students with limited means miss out on quality learning, adding to their financial burden."

This statement indicates students' economic capacities along with technological features can shape access disparities among students. For instance, students in the free-only group frequently highlighted the features limitations imposed by restricted access. Student B03 stated, *"It really feels different because free is often limited to sending files or wanting to ask questions,"* reflecting the constraints commonly experienced by free users. Such limitations may reduce learning efficiency and reinforce perceptions of unequal learning opportunities among students, as stated by Student A09:

> *"The difference in access creates a gap between students. Those who can afford premium tools often get better features, faster responses, and more accurate outputs, which can improve their learning efficiency. Meanwhile, students using free versions may face limitations that slow them down. This can lead to unequal learning opportunities and outcomes."*

As stated by Student A09, there are clear discrepancies between the features available to paying and non-paying users. Students who cannot afford premium subscriptions, or who choose to rely solely on free services, often encounter limitations such as slower responses, restricted functionalities, and less accurate outputs. However, despite acknowledging these imbalances, some students questioned whether access differences necessarily translate into educational inequality. For example, Student A29 argued, "*I think it's actually good and do not give an inequality impact. Because students' learning process actually depends on how strong the source that they use when they learn, not based on what kind of AI that they use."*

This statement suggests that learning outcomes are influenced more by students' ability to critically evaluate and utilise information from multiple sources than by relying on AI platforms. In other words, the participant emphasises learner agency and digital

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literacy over technological features, indicating that the educational value of GenAI depends not solely on access to advanced tools but also on how effectively students engage with and validate AI-generated information.

Differences in GenAI Usage and Perceptions Across Access Groups

To investigate whether different levels of GenAI access are associated with differences in students' AI usage patterns and perceptions of learning impact, fairness, and global inequality, independent-samples t-tests were conducted comparing students with free-only access and those with both free and premium access. The findings are presented as follows:

Table 2. Statistical analysis

Variable	Group	Mean	SD	t-value	p-value	Cohen's d
AI_USE	Free + Premium (n=19)	3.81	0.41	1.70	0.091	0.4243
	Free only (n=107)	3.55	0.64			
ACCESS	Free + Premium	3.56	0.49	-1.79	0.076	-0.4453
	Free only	3.83	0.63			
IMPACT	Free + Premium	3.35	0.45	-0.66	0.510	-0.1645
	Free only	3.43	0.54			
FAIR	Free + Premium	3.32	0.43	0.58	0.564	0.1439
	Free only	3.24	0.56			
GLOBAL	Free + Premium	3.43	0.52	0.10	0.919	0.0255
	Free only	3.42	0.57			

Note. df = 124 for all comparisons; significance threshold $p < .05$

The table above presents the results of independent-samples t-tests comparing five variables between the two access groups: students' AI usage, access perception, perceived learning impact, fairness perception, and awareness of global inequality. The independent-samples t-tests found no statistically significant differences between the two groups on any of the five variables (all $p > .05$, $df = 124$). The two variables closest to conventional significance were AI usage ($p= .091$) and access perception ($p= .076$), both with small-to-moderate effect sizes (Cohen's $d= 0.42$ and -0.45, respectively), suggesting a descriptive tendency for students with both free and premium access to use GenAI tools somewhat more frequently, and for free-only students to be somewhat more sensitive to access limitations, even though these differences did not reach statistical significance.

This pattern should be interpreted cautiously as there are only 19 students in the premium-access group compared to 107 in the free-only group, the comparison is likely underpowered to detect effects of this size, so the absence of significance should not be read as strong evidence that no real difference exists. The remaining three variables, perceived learning impact ($p= .510$, $d= -0.16$), fairness perception ($p= .564$, $d= 0.14$), and global inequality awareness ($p= .919$, $d = 0.03$), showed negligible effect sizes alongside non-significance, offering more consistent evidence that access type alone does not meaningfully shape these particular perceptions.

Students' perceptions

Regardless of the access disparity between the two groups, the students shared similar views on several aspects of integrating GenAI tools into learning, although the degree of agreement varied. They shared concerns related to accuracy and reliability, lack of verification and critical thinking, prompting difficulties, over-reliance, and plagiarism. Even students who have access to the premium access still underlined the issues with accuracy and reliability of the GenAI responses. Student A17 noted, *"One challenge I face when using AI tools is that sometimes the answers are not fully accurate, so I still need to check them again."* Similarly, the others in this group also noted the same issue and listed other challenges, as said by Student A09:

> *"AI sometimes gives inaccurate or misleading information, so I need to double-check the results. Another issue is that not all features are available for free users, which limits what I can do. I also sometimes struggle with writing effective prompts to get the best answers."*

Both groups of students are aware of the various limitations of using GenAI tools for their learning. As these students mentioned, the information provided by AI can be misleading and requires their initiative to verify it. Student B17 wrote several challenges she faced, including "*AI sometimes gives inaccurate or misleading information, so I need to double-check the answers. Second, it may not fully understand my questions and give irrelevant responses."* Student B28 was also aware of some challenges she found in using GenAI, including "*accuracy issues, where information can be incorrect, over-reliance that reduces critical thinking, limited understanding of context, and concerns about privacy and data security*."

While students in both groups shared the same understanding of GenAI tools' potential harms in learning, the students still emphasised differences based on their access. Those who have premium access underline a more balanced view toward AI advantages and limitations, greater awareness of ethical use, and responsible AI integration, emphasis on user skills and concerns about dependency despite broader access. As Student A04 stated, *"…I don't think this thing [premium access] can affect learning because it depends on how we use it. Even the free version can be good like a premium if we know how to write a prompt."* Additionally, these students acknowledge the advantages of premium access, such as more complete features, faster responses, etc., while still emphasising the limitations in terms of ethics and appropriate GenAI use in learning.

Meanwhile, most students who only received free access highlight usage limits and restricted premium features, internet connection issues, and their demand for equal institutional access. They also emphasise implementing more adaptive strategies to compensate for limitations, such as double-checking the prompt and responses to ensure they are aligned. Student B31 mentioned, *"Sometimes the answers are not always accurate, so I need to double-check. It can also be hard to know how to ask the right question to get a good answer."*

These students, aware of the limitations of the free service they were using, took deliberate action to ensure the accuracy, completeness, and appropriateness of AI responses. Additionally, as elicited by Student B09, *"the constant prompts to upgrade to premium"* is among the challenges faced by those students when using GenAI. She also noted, *"The best tools are usually locked behind a paywall. I've also noticed that if I ask an AI to explain something, the answers are often incomplete, so I must follow up with very specific questions."*

Most students in this group also express their request for the schools and institutions to provide them with equal access to AI, as Student B09 added that what they need is a *"support for equal access to high-quality AI tools" to help them is necessary learn more effectively. Furthermore, the students in this group are aware about the needs to address the challenges, as Student B20 underlined that they needed "access to resources"* where the *"…universities can provide*

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access to premium AI tools or computer labs with good internet connections for students who need them."

Another main theme emerging from the qualitative data is related to the language style noticed by the EFL students in this research settings. Unlike students majoring in more technical disciplines, EFL learners interact with AI primarily through language production and interpretation. As a result, issues such as tone, clarity, contextual appropriateness, and linguistic accuracy become central in their evaluation of AI effectiveness. They can assess and adapt AI responses, indicating their sensitivity to language clarity and appropriateness. For instance, Student A08 stated, *"AI often gives answers that are very similar to those of other users, so my work may not feel original".*

This makes me worried about plagiarism. I also sometimes find it hard to make my answer more personal and different from others," emphasising her effort to adapt and adjust her response. Similarly, Student A13 emphasize the clarity issue of AI-generated responses, "*AI sometimes gives ambiguous answers, which can confuse students." She added, "… free AI can provide answers, but they are often more general and sometimes unclear. On the other hand, premium AI can give you more detailed and accurate answers. And it's easy to understand."* This student acknowledged how the paid access might provide them with a clearer, high-quality, and tailored response, highlighting the perceived potential inequality in GenAI generated access.

Furthermore, AI-generated responses might have been perceived as unnatural by learners. As written by Student B28, "the language that AI uses are sometimes different from what we use in daily life, so it's hard to understand." *Similarly, Student B70 expressed her concern about AI responses by saying that its language is "too high",* indicating the complexity and inappropriate tone of the AI responses, which makes it hard for the students to understand. The students were also aware that this discrepancy could be caused by their side, as noted by Student B102, *"…I also sometimes struggle with writing clear prompts so the AI can understand exactly what I need."*

As most participants agree on the common challenges of using GenAI as learning assistance tools, these students shared the perceived urgency of receiving supports from their institutions or instructors in helping them to obtain fairer access, guidance on ethical and effective AI use, as well as training in prompting and AI literacy. In terms of fair access, Student A04 demanded that his school provide them a free access to a premium GenAI service, "*because as I knew, university X and Y has it [an accessible premium service] for their students so they can access a premium account for an education platform. We paid our tuition on time for a good facility."* Furthermore, their access should be guided, as Student A09 wrote,

> *"I expect teachers and universities to provide guidance on how to use AI tools responsibly and effectively. It would also help if they could give access to reliable AI tools or subscriptions for students. Additionally, clear rules about AI usage in assignments and support in developing critical thinking skills are important"*

Student B23 proposed that there should be standardised GenAI tools for the students, emphasising "equal access to a standard AI tool for everyone, plus clear guidance on how to use it responsibly." *She added that teachers should design tasks by considering the possibility of GenAI being in use by making sure that students' tasks "reflect thinking and effort, not who has the most expensive subscription."* Finally, what most students are concerned about is the guide on how to use AI ethically and avoid overreliance, as represented by Student B102, *"[the university] should teach students how to verify AI-generated information and avoid overdependence on technology. I also hope universities can provide free or affordable access to useful AI tools for students, so everyone has equal opportunities to improve their learning experience."*

Overall, the participants perceived GenAI as a helpful learning support tool which need to be used with caution. Most of them acknowledge the potential harms of overreliance on using GenAI as learning assistance tools and expect their institutions to provide them with the necessary guidance in application. The differences in access influence their experience in using the tools and perceived opportunities. However, regardless of access type, they all highly perceived the importance of critical literacy and ability in creating appropriate prompts.

4. Discussion

The use of GenAI by students globally is inevitable. The participants in this study have been undoubtedly integrating these tools in their daily academic lives. Unsurprisingly, they are similarly keen on using two big platforms, ChatGPT from OpenAI and Gemini from Google. These numbers demonstrate that the majority of students prefer these two options among many other options available, such as Claude, Perplexity, Grok, etc. Many studies have proved the effectiveness of ChatGPT in assisting learning (Agustini, 2023; Fitria, 2023; Yuan et al., 2024). While these AI tools are found preferable by the students, they are still not free from limitations.

Students identified several limitations, including the occasional use of inappropriate language styles and tones. These findings are consistent with those reported by Baskara (2025), who highlighted the advantages of ChatGPT in providing realistic conversational practice and flexible content-based learning, as well as Gemini's strengths in multilingual support. However, the study further identified several limitations, such as complex language use, inflexible conversational responses, and reliance on internet access and learners' proficiency levels.

In total, 84.9% of participants admit that they only have the free and limited access, while the remaining small number of students mention that they also have premium access in addition to the free service. While very few students have a premium access to the tools, this difference might bring inequality or perceived usefulness in integrating AI within classroom learning. Perkins et al. (2024) illustrated that students who can afford premium access to GenAI tools may derive greater benefits than those who cannot, identifying this disparity as a key risk. They highlight that such differences raise concerns about inequity and exclusion, with potential implications for educational equity. A study by Chau (2026) comparing the performance of multiple GenAI models demonstrates that paid services performed better compared to free alternatives in answering college students' tasks, highlighting the superiority of paid or premium access with all its benefits. According to ChatGPT (n.d.), free ChatGPT offers basic access with strict limits, while paid plans provide more powerful models, higher usage, faster performance, and advanced features.

This suggests that there might be a digital inequality in access to AI resources, which highlights the potential to enlarge the gap and disparity in language education resources between the Global North and Global South (Dobinson et al., 2024). Furthermore, the high cost of developing AI systems is a key factor driving this inequality, as training large language models (LLMs) requires substantial financial investment. For example, Gemini reportedly cost between $30 million and $191 million to train, excluding staff salaries, while ChatGPT-4's technical development costs were estimated at approximately $41 million to $78 million (Buchholz, 2024).

There needs to be conscious and intentional efforts to form locally representative, inclusive, and affordable AI solutions because the advantages of AI will remain inaccessible for the L2 learners in developing countries (Dovchin, 2024). In response to this, universities or policymakers should provide more inclusive and affordable AI solutions. The

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participants in the present study perceived that it is their teachers', institutions', as well as schools' responsibility to equip them with reliable and accessible AI tools.

In this case, universities and educators could provide guidelines and clear instructions for integration in tasks or classroom activities. Pack (2023) argues that second language educators should evaluate the alignment of sociocultural dimensions across micro, meso, and macro levels between teachers and learners in determining the appropriateness of integrating AI tools. These aspects may include how appropriate the tool is for classroom culture and individual interactions, as well as considerations of institutional policies, political, economic, and cultural factors, and the availability of access to the technology.

This present study focuses on investigating how different levels of access to GenAI tools (free vs. premium) are associated with students' AI usage patterns and perceptions in learning. Although descriptive data pointed toward a disparity in access, with premium-access students reporting somewhat higher AI usage and free-only students reporting somewhat greater sensitivity to access limitations, the independent-samples t-tests did not find these differences to be statistically significant (AI usage: $p = .091$; access perception: $p=.076$), and the effect sizes were only small to moderate. Given the considerable imbalance between the premium-access group ($n=19$) and the free-only group ($n=107$), this insignificant result is best understood as inconclusive rather than as evidence that access type has no impact on usage or access perception.

In fact, the qualitative data tell a more consistent story that students who had free-access-only repeatedly and specifically mentioned feature limitations, internet connection issues, and demands for equal institutional access, in ways that premium-access students did not. This divergence between the quantitative and qualitative strands suggests that the disparity may be real but too fine-grained, or the quantitative sample too small and unequal, for the t-tests to detect it reliably. For the remaining three variables, perceived learning impact, fairness, and global inequality, both the statistical tests and the effect sizes converged on showing minimal differences.

Students in both groups demonstrated similar concerns regarding prompting skills, critical thinking, accuracy, over-reliance, and AI-related inequality. This suggests that access alone does not automatically translate into better perceived learning outcomes because students need to have ability to evaluate, adapt, and strategically use AI responses. The findings are slightly in contrast with the notion of digital bias in the classroom as mentioned by Yuan et al. (2024). While variations in access types might exists in terms of students' AI use and perceptions of access limitation, it does not automatically produce substantially different perceived learning outcomes and personal views on inequality within classrooms or worldwide.

Having access to premium GenAI platforms allows the students to have a more balanced view of the advantages and limitations of using AI tools. Meanwhile, most students who cannot afford or choose not to buy the subscriptions demonstrated more concern about limitations and restrictions, but at the same time are fully aware of the need to ensure accuracy and instruction following the ability of the AI tools. In line with the previous studies (Agustini, 2023; Wang et al., 2024; Zhang et al., 2026), learners' agency, autonomy and self-efficacy might play a bigger role in determining learners' successful engagement with GenAI in the EFL learning context. Additionally, teachers' and institutional roles are highly needed to equip the learners with guidance and training to ethically and appropriately integrate AI in learning, as well as provide them with the necessary resources.

5. Conclusion

The present study concludes that GenAI tools are widely used by EFL learners for academic and learning-related purposes. However, access levels vary, with only a small proportion of students having premium subscriptions to the most frequently used platforms, particularly OpenAI's ChatGPT and Google's Gemini. Statistically, the two access groups did not differ significantly on any of the five measured variables, though descriptive trends and qualitative accounts point toward students with both free and premium access using GenAI tools somewhat more frequently, and students with free-only access showing stronger, more specific awareness of access inequality and platform limitations. Given the small and unequal group sizes, these patterns may require further investigation with a larger and more balanced sample to provide stronger evidence.

Although the two groups differ in their experiences of access and usage, their perceptions of learning impact and fairness remain relatively similar. Both groups express concerns regarding over-reliance, reduced independent thinking, and academic integrity, reflecting shared critical awareness toward the use of GenAI in education. In addition, students with both free and premium access tend to present a more balanced view of the advantages and limitations of GenAI as learning support tools, while free-only users place greater emphasis on restrictions, limited features, and unequal learning opportunities.

The findings also show that students expect universities and lecturers to provide clearer guidance and training on the ethical and effective use of GenAI tools. Therefore, this study implies that universities and EFL teachers should establish clear guidelines, promote critical AI literacy, and provide more equitable learning support to reduce confusion and minimize potential inequality risks associated with GenAI integration in educational settings.

This study has several limitations. The sample was drawn using convenience sampling from two universities in Makassar, which limits the generalizability of the findings to other regions or institutional contexts. The premium-access group was also considerably smaller than the free-only group which may affect the stability of the group comparisons despite the reported effect sizes. In addition, access type and usage were self-reported, and the cross-sectional design captures a single point in time rather than change over extended period. Future research could employ stratified or larger-scale sampling across multiple regions, incorporate longitudinal designs, and triangulate self-report data with actual usage logs.

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