



Socio-Cultural and Geographic Inequalities in EAP and EOP Learning in India: Evidence from a Cross-Regional Mixed-Methods Study

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.36892/ijlls.v8i4.2751>

APA Citation: Mirza, S., & Yadav, M. K. (2026). Socio-Cultural and Geographic Inequalities in EAP and EOP Learning in India: Evidence from a Cross-Regional Mixed-Methods Study. *International Journal of Language and Literary Studies*, 8(4),363-379. <https://doi.org/10.36892/ijlls.v8i4.2751>

Received:

20/05/2026

Accepted:

05/06/2026

Keywords:

English for Academic Purposes; English for Occupational Purposes; socio-cultural inequality; geographic disparity; India

Abstract

English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and English for Occupational Purposes (EOP) are central to educational mobility and professional participation in multilingual India, yet access to effective learning remains uneven. This study investigates socio-cultural and geographic inequalities shaping EAP and EOP learning across Northern, Eastern, Southern, and North-Eastern India. A sequential explanatory mixed-methods design was employed with 200 learners, equally distributed across four regions and urban-rural locations. Quantitative data examined cultural confidence, language anxiety, learning-strategy effectiveness, access conditions, and English proficiency, while qualitative responses and interviews explored learners' experiences in depth. Results revealed significant regional, geographic, and gender-based differences. Urban learners consistently reported higher cultural confidence than rural learners, while Eastern India showed the lowest confidence and highest anxiety. Female participants generally reported greater language anxiety, although the magnitude varied regionally. Technology-assisted learning received the highest effectiveness rating, but technology, role-playing, and family support together explained only a small proportion of proficiency variance. Qualitative findings highlighted urban-rural resource disparities, rhetorical mismatch, authority-related constraints, identity tensions, and limited transitional support between academic and professional English. The study concludes that equitable EAP and EOP provision requires culturally responsive curricula, teacher development, low-anxiety interaction, inclusive assessment, and investment in rural digital and educational infrastructure.

1. Introduction

English occupies a complex position in India's multilingual educational landscape. It functions as an important medium of higher education, research, professional communication, and employment, while access to high-quality English instruction remains unevenly distributed. Learners' opportunities to acquire and use English differ according to their geographic location, educational environment, social background, cultural expectations, and

exposure to academic and professional communication. Consequently, competence in English cannot be understood solely as an individual linguistic achievement. It is also shaped by the social and institutional conditions under which learning occurs.

English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and English for Occupational Purposes (EOP) represent two major branches of English for Specific Purposes. EAP prepares learners to participate in academic discourse through skills such as critical reading, formal argumentation, academic writing, citation, and disciplinary communication (Hyland, 2006). EOP focuses on communicative practices associated with occupational settings, including workplace interaction, report writing, negotiation, presentations, professional correspondence, and intercultural communication. Both fields emphasize the importance of aligning language instruction with learners' target needs and the contexts in which English will be used (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987; Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998; Basturkmen, 2010). However, learners' ability to benefit from such instruction is influenced by more than curriculum content. Their participation is mediated by confidence, anxiety, identity, social expectations, access to resources, and opportunities for meaningful language use.

Socio-cultural approaches to language acquisition provide an appropriate foundation for examining these influences. From this perspective, language learning develops through interaction, mediation, and participation in socially situated practices rather than through the isolated acquisition of grammatical knowledge (Vygotsky, 1978). Learners require access to supportive interlocutors, culturally meaningful tasks, and communicative environments in which linguistic knowledge can be applied. Such opportunities are not equally available across educational settings. Learners in well-resourced urban institutions may encounter English through digital platforms, academic networks, extracurricular activities, and professional interactions, whereas those in rural or under-resourced institutions may have fewer opportunities to use English beyond the classroom.

Identity and power relations further influence learners' engagement with English. Norton Peirce (1995) argues that participation in second-language learning depends not only on motivation but also on learners' investment in the social identities and opportunities associated with the target language. Darwin and Norton (2015) subsequently conceptualize investment as an interaction among identity, ideology, and capital. This perspective is especially relevant to India, where English may represent academic achievement and professional mobility while simultaneously remaining connected to social privilege, institutional inequality, and colonial history. Learners may therefore recognize the instrumental value of English but differ substantially in their confidence, sense of belonging, and access to the resources required to acquire it.

Cultural expectations can also affect classroom participation and communicative behaviour. Hierarchical teacher-student relationships may discourage questioning, disagreement, or critical engagement, although these practices are frequently valued in academic English. Similarly, learners accustomed to indirectness, deference, or group-oriented communication may experience difficulty when professional English requires assertive presentations, negotiation, or direct workplace interaction. Such challenges should not automatically be interpreted as linguistic deficits. They may instead reflect differences between learners' existing communicative practices and the cultural or rhetorical expectations embedded in dominant EAP and EOP models.

These issues are particularly important because widely used EAP and EOP frameworks have largely developed within Anglo-American academic and professional environments. Their direct application to India may insufficiently account for the country's extensive regional, linguistic, cultural, and infrastructural diversity. India should not be treated as a homogeneous language-learning context. Northern, Eastern, Southern, and North-Eastern regions differ in educational infrastructure, patterns of multilingualism, exposure to English, occupational opportunities, and relationships between local languages and English. Urban-rural disparities

may create further inequalities within each region by shaping access to trained teachers, digital technologies, English-language materials, and authentic communicative environments.

Despite growing interest in English language education in India, three gaps remain evident. First, many studies are limited to individual institutions, disciplines, or geographic settings and therefore provide insufficient evidence about cross-regional variation. Second, research frequently examines linguistic proficiency or learning strategies without adequately considering the structural and socio-cultural conditions that shape their effectiveness. Third, EAP and EOP are often investigated separately, even though Indian learners may encounter both academic and employment-related English demands across their educational progression. A comparative investigation is therefore required to determine whether barriers such as language anxiety, limited cultural confidence, and unequal resource access are localized concerns or recurring patterns across diverse Indian contexts.

The present study addresses these gaps through a cross-regional mixed-methods investigation of 200 learners from Northern, Eastern, Southern, and North-Eastern India. The sample includes balanced urban and rural representation and encompasses high-school, undergraduate, and postgraduate educational levels. Quantitative evidence concerning cultural confidence, language anxiety, perceived learning-strategy effectiveness, access conditions, and English proficiency is integrated with qualitative accounts of learners' experiences. This design enables both the identification of group-level patterns and the interpretation of the socio-cultural conditions underlying them. The study establishes a sequential explanatory mixed-methods framework and provides balanced regional and urban-rural comparisons for examining these inequalities.

Accordingly, the study addresses the following research questions:

1. How do cultural confidence, language anxiety, proficiency, and perceived access to English-learning resources vary across the four Indian regions?
2. To what extent do geographic location, gender, and educational level differentiate learners' EAP and EOP experiences?
3. Which learning strategies are perceived as most effective, and how do their reported effects vary across demographic and geographic groups?
4. What pedagogical and policy implications emerge from the identified socio-cultural and geographic inequalities?

By addressing these questions, the study contributes to EAP and EOP scholarship in three ways. It provides comparative evidence from multiple Indian regions, positions geographic inequality as a structural dimension of language acquisition, and demonstrates the importance of integrating quantitative patterns with learners' qualitative experiences. The findings are intended to support culturally responsive and context-sensitive EAP and EOP provision rather than uniform instructional models that overlook differences in learners' identities, environments, and access to linguistic resources.

2. Literature Review

2.1 EAP and EOP as Socially Situated Practices

English for Academic Purposes and English for Occupational Purposes developed within the broader field of English for Specific Purposes, which emphasizes the relationship between language instruction and the communicative needs of particular learner groups (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987; Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998). Although both domains share this needs-based orientation, they prepare learners for different communicative environments. EAP focuses primarily on participation in higher education through academic reading, critical writing, argumentation, citation, presentations, and discipline-specific discourse (Hyland, 2006, 2009). EOP addresses workplace communication through professional correspondence, report writing, negotiation, teamwork, presentations, and occupation-specific genres (Basturkmen, 2010).

These competencies cannot be reduced to vocabulary and grammar. Academic and professional communication is governed by expectations concerning authority, directness, politeness, argumentation, audience awareness, and appropriate participation. EAP and EOP learning should therefore be understood as entry into particular discourse communities rather than simply the accumulation of linguistic knowledge. Learners must acquire not only language forms but also the cultural and institutional conventions through which those forms become meaningful.

This social orientation is particularly relevant in multilingual contexts. Dominant EAP models frequently emphasize linear argumentation, explicit claims, critical engagement with sources, and individual authorial positioning (Hyland, 2006). These conventions are valuable for academic participation but are not culturally neutral. Learners educated within rhetorical traditions that place greater emphasis on indirectness, deference, contextual explanation, or collective authority may experience difficulty when their established communicative practices differ from institutional expectations. Similarly, EOP learners may possess sufficient grammatical knowledge but remain unfamiliar with the pragmatic requirements of meetings, interviews, negotiations, and intercultural teamwork.

Consequently, learner performance should not be interpreted exclusively in terms of individual proficiency. It also reflects the extent to which educational institutions make academic and professional conventions visible, provide opportunities for meaningful participation, and recognize learners' existing linguistic and cultural resources.

2.2 Socio-Cultural Mediation of Language Learning

Sociocultural Theory provides the principal theoretical basis for understanding language acquisition as a socially mediated process. Vygotsky (1978) argued that cognitive development occurs through interaction and the use of culturally situated mediational tools. Within the Zone of Proximal Development, learners perform tasks with guidance that they would not initially complete independently. Applied to language education, this principle highlights the importance of scaffolding, peer interaction, teacher support, and participation in meaningful communicative activity (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006).

The implications for EAP and EOP are substantial. Academic writing develops through engagement with models, feedback, disciplinary texts, teachers, and peer communities. Professional communication similarly requires participation in simulations, workplace scenarios, role plays, and authentic interactions. However, access to these mediational opportunities varies considerably. Learners in institutions with experienced teachers, digital resources, collaborative activities, and external professional networks are likely to encounter richer opportunities for language development than learners in under-resourced environments.

Second-language acquisition theories also demonstrate the importance of access and participation. Krashen's (1985) input hypothesis emphasizes exposure to comprehensible language, whereas Swain's (1985) output hypothesis stresses the role of language production in helping learners identify gaps in their competence. Both input and output depend on the availability of suitable communicative environments. Where opportunities to hear, read, speak, and write English are limited, learners may understand its educational or occupational value but remain unable to obtain sufficient practice.

Affective conditions further mediate this process. Language anxiety may reduce learners' willingness to speak, ask questions, participate in discussions, or take communicative risks. Krashen's (1985) affective-filter perspective suggests that anxiety can obstruct the effective processing of linguistic input. Within EAP, anxiety may appear in seminar participation, academic presentations, or critical discussion. Within EOP, it may become more pronounced in interviews, workplace meetings, negotiations, and interactions with professionally senior speakers. Cultural confidence and language anxiety are therefore closely connected to the social environments in which learners are expected to communicate.

2.3 Identity, Power, and Cultural Confidence

Identity-based perspectives extend socio-cultural analysis by examining why learners with similar linguistic abilities may participate differently. Norton Peirce (1995) distinguishes investment from conventional notions of motivation. A learner may be strongly motivated to acquire English while remaining reluctant to participate in settings where their accent, gender, regional background, or social identity is devalued. Investment therefore depends on whether learners believe that participation will provide access to valued forms of social, educational, or economic capital.

Darvin and Norton (2015) conceptualize investment through the interaction of identity, ideology, and capital. This model is especially appropriate for the Indian context because English is simultaneously associated with educational advancement, employment, prestige, social inequality, and colonial history. Learners may view English as essential for mobility but may not experience equal access to the institutions and networks through which its benefits are distributed.

Cultural confidence refers here to learners' perceived ability to communicate across academic and professional settings without experiencing their cultural or linguistic identity as a disadvantage. It is not identical to general language proficiency. A learner may have adequate vocabulary and grammar but lack confidence when expected to challenge an academic authority, communicate directly with a workplace superior, or interact with speakers from unfamiliar cultural backgrounds. Such difficulties emerge from the relationship between linguistic ability, institutional expectations, power relations, and perceived legitimacy.

Cultural frameworks can help interpret these communicative differences, although they must be used cautiously. Hofstede's (1980) concepts of power distance and collectivism, for example, provide a broad explanation of why learners may avoid challenging teachers or prioritize group harmony over individual expression. However, national-level cultural models cannot fully represent India's considerable internal diversity. Regional, linguistic, gender-based, educational, and urban-rural differences require context-sensitive analysis rather than assumptions about a single Indian communication culture.

2.4 Geographic Inequality and Access to English-Learning Resources

Geographic location affects language learning through unequal access to institutional and technological resources. Urban learners are more likely to encounter English-medium institutions, private language training, digital connectivity, professional networks, and opportunities to interact with proficient speakers. Rural learners may depend more heavily on formal classroom instruction and may have fewer opportunities to use English in authentic academic or occupational situations.

Digital technologies can partially reduce these limitations by providing access to online materials, virtual communication, pronunciation tools, professional simulations, and self-paced learning. Technology-assisted instruction may be particularly valuable where direct access to English-speaking communities is limited (Godwin-Jones, 2015). Nevertheless, technology does not automatically produce equality. Differences in internet connectivity, device availability, digital literacy, instructional guidance, and language support can reproduce existing educational inequalities. As Warschauer (2003) argues, meaningful digital participation depends not only on physical access but also on the social and educational resources required to use technology effectively.

Geographic disadvantage should therefore not be treated as a background demographic characteristic. It may influence the quality of input, frequency of output, availability of feedback, exposure to professional registers, and opportunities for intercultural communication. These conditions can affect cultural confidence, anxiety, proficiency, and the perceived effectiveness of different learning strategies.

2.5 Research Gap and Conceptual Position

Previous scholarship establishes that EAP and EOP learning is influenced by discourse conventions, social interaction, identity, affective conditions, and access to communicative resources. However, these dimensions are often investigated separately. EAP studies

commonly emphasize academic writing and genre, whereas EOP studies focus on needs analysis and workplace communication. Research on identity and anxiety frequently concentrates on individual experiences, while studies of digital access may treat technology as distinct from socio-cultural participation.

Moreover, evidence from India is often institution-specific or regionally restricted. Such studies cannot adequately determine whether observed barriers reflect local circumstances or broader structural inequalities. Comparative evidence across Indian regions and urban-rural settings remains limited.

The present study therefore adopts an integrated framework in which learner outcomes are shaped by four interconnected dimensions: cultural norms, social and institutional hierarchies, identity and investment, and geographic access. These dimensions influence the opportunities learners receive for interaction, mediation, linguistic input, communicative output, and participation in EAP and EOP practices. Cultural confidence, language anxiety, strategy effectiveness, and proficiency are examined as outcomes of this interaction rather than as isolated individual characteristics. This framework allows regional and demographic differences to be interpreted within the wider structural conditions of English language education in India.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The study employed a cross-sectional sequential explanatory mixed-methods design, combining quantitative survey evidence with qualitative responses and case-study interviews. The quantitative phase was conducted first to identify regional, geographic, and demographic patterns in learners' EAP and EOP experiences. The qualitative phase subsequently provided contextual explanations for the observed statistical relationships. This design was selected because socio-cultural inequalities in language learning require both numerical comparison across participant groups and interpretive evidence concerning learners' experiences (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017).

The study was guided by a pragmatic research orientation, under which quantitative and qualitative approaches were treated as complementary rather than competing forms of evidence. Integration occurred during interpretation through comparison of statistical findings with themes identified in participants' open-ended responses and interviews.

3.2 Study Setting and Participants

The study was conducted across four geographically and socio-culturally diverse regions of India: Northern, Eastern, Southern, and North-Eastern India. These regions were selected to capture differences in multilingual environments, educational infrastructure, cultural practices, and exposure to academic and professional English.

The final sample comprised 200 learners, with 50 participants recruited from each region. Within every regional subsample, participants were equally distributed between urban and rural settings, resulting in 100 urban and 100 rural respondents. Participants represented three educational levels: high school, undergraduate, and postgraduate. Eligibility required enrolment in an English-medium educational institution and previous exposure to EAP- or EOP-related instruction.

A combined stratified and purposive sampling procedure was adopted. Stratification ensured balanced representation across the four regions and urban-rural locations, whereas purposive selection ensured that participants had experience relevant to the research objectives. The sample structure is presented in Table 1.

Region	Urban (n)	Rural (n)	Total (n)
Northern India	25	25	50
Eastern India	25	25	50
Southern India	25	25	50
North-Eastern India	25	25	50

Total	100	100	200
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Table 1. Sample distribution by region and geographic location.

Data were collected between April and August 2022 using an online survey distributed through Google Forms. Online administration facilitated participation across geographically dispersed urban and rural settings, although differences in digital access were recognized as a potential source of sampling limitation. The study's regional structure, participant distribution, instruments, and analytical sequence are documented in the study's methodology.

3.3 Data Collection Instruments

Quantitative data were collected using a structured questionnaire consisting of demographic items, five-point Likert-scale statements, and English-proficiency assessment items. The Likert scale ranged from 1, representing strongly disagree, to 5, representing strongly agree. The questionnaire measured the following principal dimensions:

1. cultural confidence in academic and professional communication;
2. language anxiety in EAP and EOP settings;
3. perceived effectiveness of learning strategies;
4. access to English-learning opportunities and resources; and
5. perceptions of the quality and cultural relevance of EAP and EOP instruction.

Learning-strategy items addressed technology-assisted learning, role-playing and simulation, and family or community support. English-proficiency items were included to establish a common baseline for comparison across demographic and geographic groups.

The questionnaire also contained open-ended items asking participants to describe the socio-cultural barriers they encountered and suggest improvements to English-language programmes. These responses generated qualitative evidence from the full sample and enabled participants to elaborate on issues that could not be adequately represented through fixed-response items.

To obtain more detailed accounts, semi-structured case-study interviews were conducted with eight purposively selected participants, comprising two participants from each region. Participants were selected because their survey responses provided comparatively rich or representative accounts of socio-cultural and EAP-EOP learning challenges. Interviews were conducted through video conferencing, lasted approximately 45 minutes, and were audio-recorded with permission. The interview protocol was piloted with two individuals who were not included in the final sample.

3.4 Validity and Reliability

Content validity of the proficiency assessment was evaluated by a panel of five specialists in applied linguistics and English-language teaching. Their review examined the relevance, clarity, and appropriateness of the items for learners from different educational levels and regional backgrounds.

Internal consistency of the Likert-scale dimensions was assessed using Cronbach's alpha. The coefficients ranged from 0.73 to 0.81, exceeding the minimum criterion of 0.70 commonly applied in educational and social-science research (Field, 2013). Exploratory factor analysis was also used to assess whether the questionnaire items corresponded with their intended constructs.

Qualitative credibility was strengthened through member checking, comparison of interview findings with open-ended survey responses, and independent coding of 20% of the qualitative dataset. Inter-coder agreement was evaluated using Cohen's kappa (Cohen, 1960), with values interpreted following established benchmarks (Landis & Koch, 1977). An audit trail documenting coding decisions, theme development, and data integration was maintained throughout the analysis.

3.5 Data Analysis

Quantitative analyses were performed using Python 3.9, principally through the pandas, SciPy, and statsmodels libraries. Frequencies, means, standard deviations, and score distributions were calculated to describe the participants and study variables. Pearson and

Spearman correlation analyses were used to examine associations among cultural confidence, language anxiety, learning-strategy effectiveness, access conditions, and English proficiency.

One-way analysis of variance was applied to examine differences across regions, geographic locations, gender groups, and educational levels. Statistical significance was assessed at $p < .05$, and eta squared was calculated to estimate effect size. Ordinary least-squares regression was used to examine whether the reported learning strategies predicted English-proficiency outcomes. Because the regression model produced low explanatory power, its results were interpreted as associative rather than causal.

Qualitative data were analysed using the six-stage thematic-analysis procedure described by Braun and Clarke (2006): familiarisation, initial coding, theme generation, theme review, theme definition, and reporting. Interview transcripts and open-ended responses were organized using NVivo. Recurring codes were consolidated into broader themes concerning geographic inequality, language anxiety, cultural and rhetorical mismatch, identity, instructional relevance, and unequal access to learning resources.

Open-ended curriculum feedback was additionally examined using VADER (Valence Aware Dictionary and sEntiment Reasoner) sentiment analysis in Python (Hutto & Gilbert, 2014). Compound polarity scores were used to classify responses as positive, neutral, or negative. Sentiment results were not treated as independent evidence of programme effectiveness; rather, they were used to supplement the thematic and questionnaire-based findings.

3.6 Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Evidence

The two evidence strands were integrated through side-by-side comparison. Statistical differences were examined alongside participants' explanations of their learning environments and communicative experiences. Convergent findings increased interpretive confidence, whereas divergent findings were retained and examined for contextual explanations rather than being excluded. This procedure enabled socio-cultural and geographic inequalities to be interpreted as interconnected educational conditions rather than isolated numerical differences.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained before data collection. Participants were informed of the purpose of the research, their right to withdraw, the intended use of the data, and the procedures adopted to protect confidentiality. Personally identifying details were replaced with participant codes, and the research data were stored securely. Separate consent was obtained for audio-recording the interviews, and recordings were deleted after transcription. No financial or academic incentives were offered.

4. Results

4.1 Overall Pattern of Socio-Cultural Variables

Across the full sample, the mean cultural-confidence score was 3.29 (SD = 0.74). Mean language anxiety was slightly higher in academic settings ($M = 3.01$, SD = 0.82) than in professional settings ($M = 2.93$, SD = 0.88). The mean English-proficiency score was 3.21 (SD = 0.68). Among the three learning approaches assessed, technology-assisted learning received the highest effectiveness rating ($M = 4.70$, SD = 0.49), substantially exceeding role-playing ($M = 2.92$, SD = 0.87) and family or community support ($M = 2.98$, SD = 0.93).

The bivariate relationships among cultural confidence, social norms, anxiety, and limited access were generally weak, with correlation coefficients not exceeding an absolute value of 0.16. This pattern indicates that the socio-cultural inequalities identified in the study could not be attributed to a single isolated factor. Rather, confidence, anxiety, access, and social expectations appeared to operate as interconnected dimensions of learners' educational environments.

4.2 Cross-Regional Differences

Cultural confidence differed significantly across the four regions, $F(3, 196) = 8.47$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .09$. Southern India recorded the highest regional mean ($M = 3.45$, SD = 0.68),

followed by Northern India ($M = 3.38$, $SD = 0.71$), North-Eastern India ($M = 3.25$, $SD = 0.72$), and Eastern India ($M = 3.20$, $SD = 0.79$). Regional differences were therefore meaningful but moderate, with Southern and Northern learners reporting greater communicative confidence than respondents from Eastern and North-Eastern India.

Eastern India also recorded the highest mean language-anxiety score ($M = 3.08$, $SD = 0.85$). Anxiety levels were comparatively lower in Northern India ($M = 2.94$, $SD = 0.80$), Southern India ($M = 2.97$, $SD = 0.76$), and North-Eastern India ($M = 2.98$, $SD = 0.82$). The combination of lower confidence and higher anxiety identified Eastern India as the region facing the most pronounced socio-cultural constraints within the sample.

Region	n	Cultural confidence, M (SD)	Language anxiety, M (SD)	Urban confidence	Rural confidence
Northern India	50	3.38 (0.71)	2.94 (0.80)	3.72	2.91
Eastern India	50	3.20 (0.79)	3.08 (0.85)	3.58	2.78
North-Eastern India	50	3.25 (0.72)	2.98 (0.82)	3.64	2.86
Southern India	50	3.45 (0.68)	2.97 (0.76)	3.81	3.02
Full sample	200	3.29 (0.74)	3.01 (0.82)	3.69	2.89

Table 2. Regional differences in cultural confidence, language anxiety, and urban-rural confidence. Note: all variables were measured on five-point scales. Urban and rural values are unadjusted marginal means.

4.3 Urban-Rural Inequalities

Geographic location produced one of the clearest patterns in the study. The full-sample cultural-confidence mean was 3.69 among urban learners and 2.89 among rural learners, representing a difference of 0.80 points. The urban-rural effect was statistically significant, $F(1, 198) = 14.23$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .12$, indicating that geographic location accounted for a substantial proportion of variation in communicative confidence.

The same direction of inequality appeared in every region. Urban-rural differences were 0.81 points in Northern India, 0.80 in Eastern India, 0.78 in North-Eastern India, and 0.79 in Southern India. The consistency of these differences is more important than small variations in their magnitude. Urban learners reported greater confidence regardless of regional and cultural context, suggesting that access to English-language resources, digital tools, trained instructors, and communicative opportunities systematically favoured urban participants.

Rural respondents also reported greater language anxiety and more limited opportunities for authentic English interaction. These disadvantages were especially evident in relation to speaking practice, role-playing, and exposure to academic and professional registers. The findings therefore position rural location not merely as a demographic descriptor but as a structural condition affecting learners' access to the social and instructional resources through which EAP and EOP competence develops.

4.4 Gender and Educational-Level Patterns

Cultural confidence differed significantly across the three gender groups, $F(2, 197) = 6.31$, $p = .002$, $\eta^2 = .06$. Language anxiety also showed a significant gender effect, $F(2, 197) = 9.18$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .08$. Female participants generally reported lower cultural confidence and higher anxiety than male and non-binary respondents, although the magnitude of this pattern differed across regions.

The gender difference was most pronounced in Eastern and Northern India, particularly in relation to anxiety about professional communication. In contrast, North-Eastern India displayed a narrower gender gap in both confidence and anxiety. This regional variation indicates that gender-related language-learning experiences were mediated by local social and cultural conditions rather than operating uniformly across the country.

Descriptive comparisons across educational levels showed a progressive increase in cultural confidence. Postgraduate participants generally reported the highest confidence, followed by undergraduate and high-school respondents. The pattern suggests that extended exposure to English-medium education and academic communication may gradually strengthen learners' confidence. Nevertheless, higher educational level did not eliminate

geographic inequalities, as rural learners remained less confident than urban learners within comparable educational categories.

Social-norm adherence did not demonstrate a significant influence on anxiety, $F(2, 197) = 1.43$, $p = .241$, $\eta^2 = .01$. Thus, broad measures of conformity to social expectations explained substantially less variation than geographic location and gender.

Comparison	F	df	p	η^2	Result
Cultural confidence: urban vs. rural	14.23	1, 198	<.001	.12	Significant
Cultural confidence: four regions	8.47	3, 196	<.001	.09	Significant
Cultural confidence: gender	6.31	2, 197	.002	.06	Significant
Language anxiety: gender	9.18	2, 197	<.001	.08	Significant
Social norms and anxiety	1.43	2, 197	.241	.01	Not significant
Strategy effectiveness: gender	0.89	2, 197	.412	.01	Not significant

Table 3. Summary of inferential results.

4.5 Perceived Effectiveness of Learning Strategies

Technology-assisted learning was rated as the most effective approach across all four regions and gender groups. Its full-sample mean of 4.70 was markedly higher than the ratings for role-playing and family or community support. Participants associated technology with flexible access to instructional materials, independent practice, online communication, and exposure to different varieties of academic and professional English.

Role-playing showed greater variability across geographic and demographic groups. Urban respondents generally evaluated it more positively than rural respondents, reflecting differences in the availability and quality of structured interactive activities. Southern India respondents reported comparatively favourable perceptions of role-playing, whereas participants in rural Eastern India described fewer opportunities to engage in simulations or professionally oriented communication.

Despite these perceived differences, the overall gender effect for strategy effectiveness was not statistically significant, $F(2, 197) = 0.89$, $p = .412$, $\eta^2 = .01$. Technology was therefore consistently valued across gender categories, while variation in role-playing appeared to be more closely connected to geographic and institutional access than to gender alone.

Ordinary least-squares regression showed that the three strategies collectively explained only 2.4% of the variance in English proficiency, $R^2 = .024$, $F(3, 196) = 1.61$, $p = .188$. Technology use ($\beta = .08$, $p = .761$), role-playing ($\beta = .11$, $p = .224$), and family or community support ($\beta = -.04$, $p = .619$) were not significant individual predictors. The low explanatory power indicates that favourable perceptions of learning strategies did not necessarily translate directly into higher proficiency when broader factors such as educational quality, confidence, anxiety, and unequal resource access were excluded from the model.

4.6 Qualitative Findings

The thematic analysis identified six recurring sub-themes across four higher-order categories. Urban-rural resource disparity was the most frequently reported theme, appearing in 52 responses. Participants from rural settings commonly described limited access to English-language books, proficient speakers, digital infrastructure, and opportunities for authentic communication. This theme directly supported the quantitative urban-rural confidence difference.

Rhetorical mismatch was identified in 47 responses. Participants described difficulty adapting to direct, thesis-led argumentation and explicit criticism in academic contexts. Register discontinuity appeared in 44 responses, showing that learners often experienced academic and professional English as different communicative systems. Authority deference inhibiting critique was identified in 39 responses, while 38 respondents referred to the absence of structured support for applying academic English in occupational situations. Colonial ambivalence appeared in 35 responses and reflected learners' simultaneous recognition of English as necessary for mobility and their perception that it remained socially distant from their identities.

Higher-order category	Sub-theme	Frequency (n)
Social barriers	Urban-rural resource disparity	52
Cultural barriers to EAP	Rhetorical mismatch	47
EAP-EOP learning experience	Register discontinuity	44
Cultural barriers to EAP	Authority deference inhibiting critique	39
EAP-EOP learning experience	Absence of transitional support	38
Identity and investment	Colonial ambivalence	35

Table 4. Qualitative themes identified in participant responses. Note: frequencies indicate the number of participants whose responses were coded under each theme. Inter-coder reliability was acceptable, with Cohen's $\kappa = .78$.

4.7 Curriculum Perceptions

Sentiment analysis of open-ended curriculum feedback classified 72% of responses as neutral, 28% as positive, and a negligible proportion as negative. The dominance of neutral responses suggests that learners did not reject their existing EAP and EOP programmes but perceived them as only moderately effective and insufficiently responsive to their cultural and contextual needs.

When asked to identify a priority for curriculum improvement, 57.7% of the combined sample selected the integration of cultural topics, while the remaining participants prioritized increased access to English-speaking environments. The preference for cultural integration was supported by the qualitative themes of rhetorical mismatch, authority deference, and identity ambivalence. Together, the quantitative and qualitative findings demonstrate that learners' concerns extended beyond linguistic content to the cultural relevance, accessibility, and social conditions of EAP and EOP instruction.

5. Discussion

This study examined how socio-cultural and geographic conditions shape EAP and EOP learning across four Indian regions. Four findings are particularly important. First, urban-rural location produced the strongest and most consistent difference in cultural confidence. Second, regional variation was significant, although geographic inequality remained visible within every region. Third, gender differences were evident in confidence and anxiety but varied according to regional context. Fourth, technology-assisted learning was rated highly across participant groups, yet learning strategies alone explained little variation in proficiency. Collectively, these results indicate that EAP and EOP outcomes are shaped less by isolated learner behaviours than by the institutional, social, and material conditions under which learning occurs.

5.1 Geographic Inequality as a Structural Determinant

The most consistent finding was the urban-rural cultural-confidence gap. Urban learners reported considerably higher confidence than rural learners across Northern, Eastern, Southern, and North-Eastern India. The similarity of the gap across culturally and linguistically distinct regions suggests that it is not attributable to a single regional tradition. Rather, it reflects a structural inequality in access to educational and communicative resources.

From a sociocultural perspective, learning develops through interaction, mediation, and participation in meaningful practices (Vygotsky, 1978; Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). Urban institutions are generally more likely to provide access to trained teachers, English-medium networks, digital tools, extracurricular activities, professional interactions, and exposure to diverse communicative situations. These resources function as mediational tools through which learners can practise academic and occupational English. Rural learners may have fewer opportunities to use English outside formal lessons, reducing access to both comprehensible input and meaningful output.

The qualitative theme of urban-rural resource disparity reinforced this interpretation. Participants associated rural learning environments with limited digital connectivity, insufficient materials, fewer proficient interlocutors, and restricted opportunities for professional communication. Geographic location therefore affected more than the availability

of technology. It shaped the entire communicative ecology within which learners developed confidence and proficiency.

This finding also challenges approaches that interpret learner underperformance primarily through motivation or strategy use. Rural learners may be strongly motivated to acquire English but lack access to the social and institutional resources required to convert motivation into participation. In Norton Peirce's (1995) terms, investment in language learning cannot be separated from access to the symbolic and material resources associated with the language. Geographic inequality consequently influences not only what learners know but also whether they perceive themselves as legitimate participants in academic and professional English environments.

5.2 Regional Variation within a Shared Pattern of Inequality

The significant regional variation in cultural confidence confirms that India cannot be treated as a homogeneous language-learning context. Southern India recorded the highest confidence, whereas Eastern India showed the lowest confidence and highest anxiety. Differences in educational infrastructure, professional exposure, multilingual practices, and access to English-medium environments may contribute to these patterns.

However, regional averages should not obscure inequalities within regions. Even in Southern India, where overall cultural confidence was comparatively high, rural respondents remained less confident than their urban counterparts. Conversely, the comparatively lower confidence recorded in Eastern India was intensified among rural learners. This interaction indicates that regional and geographic conditions operate simultaneously.

The Eastern India results are especially important because they combined lower confidence, higher anxiety, the widest reported urban-rural disadvantage, and comparatively low satisfaction with existing language programmes. These convergent findings suggest that learners in this region may experience overlapping infrastructural and socio-cultural disadvantages. Culturally responsive teaching alone may therefore be insufficient unless accompanied by improvements in access, teacher development, and communicative opportunities.

North-Eastern India presented a different pattern. Although its overall confidence remained below the Southern and Northern regional means, gender differences were narrower, while intercultural and geographic challenges remained prominent. This finding illustrates that socio-cultural barriers do not operate identically across regions. A variable that is strongly disadvantageous in one context may be less influential in another because of differences in local social structures and identity relations.

These regional distinctions support context-sensitive EAP and EOP provision. Standardized national programmes may establish common learning goals, but instructional content, examples, communication tasks, and support mechanisms should be adapted to regional linguistic and socio-cultural realities.

5.3 Gender, Identity, and Language Anxiety

Female participants generally reported higher language anxiety and lower cultural confidence than male and non-binary participants. The gender effect was strongest in Northern and Eastern India and less pronounced in North-Eastern India. This variation suggests that gender should not be interpreted as an isolated demographic predictor. Its influence is mediated by regional expectations, educational participation, professional exposure, and the communicative roles considered acceptable for different learner groups.

Language anxiety can restrict participation by discouraging learners from speaking, questioning authority, presenting ideas, or experimenting with unfamiliar forms of communication. From the perspective of Krashen's (1985) affective-filter hypothesis, anxiety can reduce learners' capacity to benefit from available input. However, the present findings suggest that anxiety is not merely an internal emotional condition. It is socially produced

through expectations concerning correctness, authority, gender roles, accent, and public performance.

The qualitative finding concerning authority deference is relevant here. Learners who are reluctant to challenge teachers or senior professionals may participate less actively in critical academic discussion and workplace communication. Such reluctance may be intensified for learners whose social positioning makes public disagreement or assertiveness particularly risky.

Norton Peirce's (1995) identity framework and Darvin and Norton's (2015) investment model provide a useful interpretation. Learners' participation depends partly on whether they believe their identities will be recognized as legitimate within the target discourse community. The relatively high confidence reported by non-binary respondents in several regional comparisons may indicate distinctive patterns of identity negotiation, although this result should be interpreted cautiously. The sample does not provide sufficient evidence to determine the mechanisms underlying this pattern. More detailed intersectional and qualitative research is required before drawing broader conclusions.

5.4 Cultural Confidence and the Limits of Linguistic Proficiency

The findings demonstrate that cultural confidence is related to, but conceptually distinct from, English proficiency. Learners may possess adequate grammatical and lexical knowledge but remain uncertain when communicating across unfamiliar cultural, institutional, or professional settings. Difficulty may arise when they are required to critique authority, present an independent argument, negotiate directly, or adopt communication practices that conflict with prior social expectations.

The themes of rhetorical mismatch and colonial ambivalence illustrate this distinction. Learners reported difficulty adapting to academic expectations concerning direct argumentation and explicit criticism. They also described English as both a pathway to mobility and a language associated with social distance and historical inequality. These findings show that EAP and EOP instruction cannot focus exclusively on language form. Learners also require explicit guidance concerning the cultural and pragmatic conventions governing academic and workplace interaction.

At the same time, culturally responsive instruction should not position Indian communicative practices as deficiencies. The purpose should be to expand learners' communicative repertoires, enabling them to understand and strategically navigate different conventions while retaining their multilingual identities. This approach differs from models that implicitly treat Anglo-American discourse norms as universally appropriate. As Hyland (2006) argues, academic communication is socially situated within disciplinary communities; therefore, its conventions should be taught explicitly rather than assumed to be culturally neutral.

5.5 Technology, Strategy Use, and Institutional Conditions

Technology-assisted learning received the highest effectiveness rating across all regions and gender groups. Participants valued digital resources for their flexibility, accessibility, exposure to varied English input, and opportunities for independent practice. This result supports the growing importance of digital tools in extending EAP and EOP learning beyond the classroom.

Nevertheless, technology, role-playing, and family support collectively explained only 2.4% of the variation in proficiency. None of the individual strategy variables significantly predicted proficiency. This result does not necessarily mean that these strategies are ineffective. Instead, it suggests that their influence depends on wider conditions that were not captured by the regression model.

For example, access to a digital platform does not guarantee effective learning. Learners require appropriate devices, reliable connectivity, digital literacy, relevant content, feedback, and pedagogical guidance. As Warschauer (2003) notes, digital inequality concerns the capacity to use technology meaningfully, not merely physical access. Similarly, role-playing

is unlikely to improve communication if activities are poorly designed, disconnected from target contexts, or conducted in environments where learners feel unsafe taking communicative risks.

The discrepancy between high perceived technology effectiveness and its non-significant proficiency coefficient is therefore theoretically important. It shows that strategy use is mediated by implementation quality, educational context, and structural access. Educational policy should consequently avoid presenting technology as an independent solution to inequality. Without investment in rural infrastructure, teacher development, accessible content, and learner support, digital innovation may reproduce the same disparities it is intended to reduce.

5.6 Contribution to EAP and EOP Research

The findings make three broader contributions. First, they demonstrate that socio-cultural factors are constitutive elements of EAP and EOP acquisition rather than secondary influences. Confidence, anxiety, identity, and access are embedded in the learning process itself.

Second, the study positions geographic inequality as a central issue in English for Specific Purposes research. EAP and EOP programmes are often designed around needs analysis, genre, and target communication, but learners' capacity to benefit from such programmes depends on whether they can access the necessary linguistic and technological resources.

Third, the study shows the value of combining cross-regional quantitative evidence with qualitative accounts. The statistical analyses identified consistent patterns, while participants' responses explained how those inequalities were experienced. The convergence of both evidence strands strengthens the conclusion that unequal EAP and EOP outcomes in India cannot be adequately addressed through learner-level strategies alone. They require culturally responsive pedagogy supported by institutional and policy-level interventions.

5.7 Pedagogical and Policy Implications

5.7.1 Culturally Responsive EAP and EOP Instruction

The findings indicate that EAP and EOP programmes should address socio-cultural competence as an integral learning outcome rather than as supplementary content. Learners require explicit instruction in the rhetorical, pragmatic, and interpersonal conventions governing academic and professional communication. However, this instruction should not present Anglo-American conventions as universally superior or treat Indian communicative practices as deficiencies. Instead, teaching should enable learners to compare different rhetorical traditions, recognise context-dependent expectations, and make informed communicative choices.

In EAP classrooms, culturally responsive practices may include comparative analysis of Indian and international academic texts, explicit teaching of argumentation and source criticism, and structured activities that allow learners to question authority in supportive environments. In EOP settings, instruction should incorporate workplace simulations situated in Indian professional contexts, pragmatic training in politeness and register, and intercultural scenarios involving communication across regional and international boundaries. Peer-mediated activities and scaffolded interaction can provide lower-risk opportunities for learners experiencing high language anxiety (Vygotsky, 1978; Lantolf & Thorne, 2006).

5.7.2 Reducing Geographic and Digital Inequalities

The consistent urban-rural confidence gap demonstrates that classroom-level reform alone will not produce equitable outcomes. Rural institutions require targeted investment in digital connectivity, devices, English-language learning materials, language laboratories, and opportunities for interaction with proficient speakers. Because continuous internet access cannot be assumed, digital programmes should include downloadable resources, mobile-compatible materials, and offline learning modules.

Technology should be integrated through a blended model rather than treated as a substitute for teaching. Digital platforms can extend access to academic texts, pronunciation support,

workplace simulations, and intercultural interaction, but their effectiveness depends on teacher guidance, appropriate task design, and reliable infrastructure (Godwin-Jones, 2015). The high perceived value of technology, combined with its non-significant regression coefficient, suggests that availability alone does not guarantee measurable proficiency gains. Institutions must therefore monitor how digital tools are used and whether rural learners can access them consistently. Rural digital infrastructure and offline-capable learning resources emerge as high-priority responses to the cross-regional access gap.

5.7.3 Teacher Development and Assessment Reform

Educators require sustained professional development in culturally responsive teaching, intercultural communication, differentiated instruction, and the facilitation of low-anxiety classroom interaction. Training should help teachers recognise how gender, identity, geographic location, and prior educational experience influence participation. It should also support the design of role-playing and collaborative activities that reflect authentic academic and occupational situations rather than decontextualised language exercises.

Assessment practices should move beyond grammatical accuracy and vocabulary knowledge. EAP assessment should include the ability to construct arguments, respond to sources, participate in academic discussion, and adapt communication to disciplinary expectations. EOP assessment should evaluate professional register, pragmatic appropriateness, teamwork, presentations, and intercultural adaptability. Such assessment would provide a more valid representation of the competencies learners need in academic and workplace environments.

At the institutional level, universities and colleges should establish partnerships with employers to conduct regular needs analyses and ensure that EOP curricula reflect actual workplace communication demands (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987). At the policy level, intercultural communication should be recognised as a core component of EAP and EOP programmes, while funding should prioritise rural infrastructure and teacher preparation. Longitudinal monitoring is also required to determine whether reforms produce sustained improvements in confidence, participation, and proficiency. These priorities are consistent with a broader policy framework that emphasises curriculum integration, professional development, digital equity, assessment reform, and industry-academic collaboration.

5.8 Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, although the study included participants from Northern, Eastern, Southern, and North-Eastern India, it did not cover Western and Central India. The findings therefore provide a cross-regional account of the selected contexts rather than a nationally representative description of all Indian EAP and EOP learners. Future research should extend the sampling frame to additional states and regions and include larger institutional samples to examine variation within as well as between regions.

Second, much of the quantitative evidence was based on self-reported perceptions of cultural confidence, language anxiety, learning strategies, and programme effectiveness. Self-report instruments are valuable for understanding learners' experiences, but responses may be affected by social desirability, differing interpretations of questionnaire items, and inaccurate self-assessment. Subsequent studies should combine questionnaires with direct proficiency tests, classroom observations, discourse analysis, and evaluations of authentic academic and workplace performance.

Third, the cross-sectional design captured participants' experiences at a single period and could not establish causal relationships. For example, the association between geographic location and cultural confidence does not demonstrate that rural residence directly causes lower confidence. Longitudinal studies are needed to investigate how learners' confidence, anxiety, and communicative competence develop across educational transitions and following specific pedagogical interventions.

Fourth, the ordinary least-squares regression model explained only 2.4% of the variance in English proficiency. This low explanatory power indicates that technology use, role-playing, and family support alone were insufficient to account for proficiency differences. Future models should incorporate institutional quality, teacher competence, socioeconomic background, prior English-medium education, digital access, frequency of authentic language use, motivation, identity, and cultural confidence. Multilevel modelling would be particularly appropriate because learners are situated within classrooms, institutions, regions, and urban or rural environments.

Fifth, online data collection may have underrepresented learners with limited internet connectivity or digital literacy, particularly in disadvantaged rural settings. Future studies should employ combined online and face-to-face recruitment to ensure more inclusive participation.

Finally, the relatively small interview subsample provided valuable contextual depth but could not fully represent the diversity of learner experiences across the four regions. Larger qualitative samples and region-specific ethnographic studies would provide a more detailed understanding of how local languages, cultural norms, gender relations, and institutional practices influence EAP and EOP participation. These limitations correspond with the methodological boundaries of the present study and indicate the need for broader, longitudinal, and institutionally grounded research.

6. Conclusion

This study examined socio-cultural and geographic inequalities affecting EAP and EOP learning among 200 participants from Northern, Eastern, Southern, and North-Eastern India. The mixed-methods findings demonstrate that English acquisition in academic and occupational contexts is shaped not only by learners' linguistic abilities or preferred learning strategies but also by unequal access to educational resources, communicative opportunities, and culturally supportive learning environments.

Geographic location emerged as the most consistent source of inequality. Urban learners reported substantially higher cultural confidence than rural learners across all four regions, confirming that the urban-rural divide is a structural feature of EAP and EOP provision rather than an isolated regional problem. Regional differences were also significant: Southern India recorded the highest cultural confidence, whereas Eastern India combined lower confidence, higher anxiety, wider geographic disparities, and less positive curriculum perceptions. These results underline the need to avoid treating India as a uniform English-learning environment.

Gender differences were evident in both cultural confidence and language anxiety, although their magnitude varied by region. Female learners generally reported greater anxiety, particularly in academic and professional situations requiring public performance, assertiveness, or communication with authority figures. The regional variation in this pattern confirms that gender-related barriers are mediated by local social and institutional conditions.

Technology-assisted learning was consistently perceived as the most effective strategy. Nevertheless, technology use, role-playing, and family support together explained only a small proportion of proficiency variation. This finding demonstrates that individual learning strategies cannot compensate for deficiencies in infrastructure, instructional quality, authentic language exposure, and socio-cultural support. Technology should therefore form part of a broader institutional strategy rather than be presented as an independent solution.

The qualitative findings further revealed that learners experienced urban-rural resource disparities, rhetorical mismatch, authority-related constraints, identity tensions, and discontinuities between academic and professional communication. These barriers show that effective EAP and EOP education must extend beyond grammar and vocabulary to include cultural confidence, pragmatic competence, rhetorical awareness, and opportunities for meaningful participation.

The study concludes that equitable EAP and EOP development in India requires coordinated intervention at classroom, institutional, and policy levels. Culturally responsive curricula, low-anxiety interactive learning, targeted teacher development, inclusive assessment, and sustained investment in rural digital and educational infrastructure are essential. By positioning geographic access, identity, confidence, and anxiety as integral components of language acquisition, the study contributes a context-sensitive perspective to English for Specific Purposes research and provides an empirical basis for more equitable academic and professional English education in India.

7. References

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