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Business communication skills in English: Industry expectations versus university preparation

Abstract

Skills gaps, deficits, or mismatches between industry expectations and university preparation are increasingly common labor market phenomena in this constantly changing globalized world. English communication skills are considered vital soft skills in all workplaces, including international business, where English is used as a business lingua franca. However, relatively little attention has been paid to English courses taught in higher education to develop English communication skills aligned with communication needs in international business dealings. This case study investigation looked into the communication skills gaps that exist between industry expectations and university preparation. Data have been collected from 43 personnel of the international ready-made garment (RMG) industry of Bangladesh through in-depth interviews. The findings show that English courses taught in higher education do not adequately align with the communication needs of the international RMG business in Bangladesh. While the RMG business industry necessitates trade-specific vocabulary, intelligibility, fluency, and workplace practical experience, English language teaching in higher education in Bangladesh often lacks these aspects. The study suggests promoting teaching English for general business purposes in Bangladesh, where students learn theoretical aspects of business communication skills in English in the classroom and practical experience in the workplace as a part of the curriculum.

Keywords: Skills mismatch, Ready-made Garment (RMG) industry, English communication skills, higher education, English as a medium of instruction, Business communication

1. Introduction

Skills gaps, deficits, or mismatches between industry expectations and university preparation are increasingly common labor market phenomena in this constantly changing globalized world (Cappelli, 2015; Hurrell, 2016). Employers often express concerns about skill shortages of graduates and staff (Hurrell, 2016; Jackson, 2014; Rhew, Black, & Keels, 2019). For example, a recent international report on higher education in Bangladesh reveals that although the number of opportunities for higher education in Bangladesh has increased through expanding the number of public and private universities, there are concerns about its quality (The Economist, 2014; Kabir, 2012) and an acute crisis in the supply of skilled graduates in the labor market (The Economist, 2014). For these skill shortages, in many countries, blame is typically given to the individual, family, government, or education system. The perceived role of individuals and families in developing skills is especially significant because many of these skills are learned outside of the job (Heckman, 2000). But the "blame game" between industry and higher education over this discrepancy is far from done (Hurrell 2016). One of these reasons is a lack of understanding of workplace needs by higher education institutions due to a lack of cooperation between higher education institutions and the industry or higher education institutions misjudging industry needs (Gilbuena et al. 2015; Hurrell 2016; König & Ribari, 2019). These issues, however, are not limited to complex or technical skills; deficiencies in "soft" skills are frequently reported (Hurrell, 2016). English communication skills (ECS) are considered vital soft skills (Çal, Admiraal & Mearns, 2022; Hradilová, 2018) in English-dominating workplaces, including international business, where English is used as a business lingua franca (BELF in short).

Over the last few decades, increasing globalization and trade liberalization have promoted English as an international business language (Dudley-Evans & John, 1998; Ferraro, 2002; John, 1996), a language of international business (Piekkari, Welch & Welch, 2014) or global language of business (Neeley, 2012), or business lingua franca (Louhiala-Salminen et al., 2005; Ehrenreich, 2010; Evans, 2013; Author 2 & colleague, 2013). Given the importance of English in a global business setting, English communication skills (ECS) have become necessary for a successful business (Ahmad, 2016; Stevens, 2005).

While English communication skills are considered vital in international business workplaces, several studies in this century have identified the particular skills used and required in different business settings in other parts of the world. In the early part of this century, So-mui and Mead (2000) evaluated the communication needs of Hong Kong textile and garment merchandisers. They said that even though English is not the native tongue of many nations where business is conducted, Hong Kong merchants communicate with most of them in English, the worldwide business language. Hence, they proposed that course designers and developers of teaching and learning materials provide more precisely focused English courses. Chew (2005) investigated

English language skills used by new entrants in their regular work in different departments in four Hong Kong banks and identified that Cantonese is used in spoken discourse and English is used in written discourse. The study further reveals the need for a greater number of bank employees who are fluent in both languages to achieve maximum productivity. Likewise, Evans (2010) examines English's importance in Cantonese business and professional communication in Hong Kong. The findings show that English continues to be the unmarked medium of written professional communication, while Cantonese is still the most commonly used language for oral communication. Tanaka (2006) uses ethnographic research to examine English-language workplace interaction in a Japanese chemical firm that is a branch of an American multinational corporation. The study demonstrates that, in truth, they only somewhat or significantly shared the English language in their communication discourse. Based on a study of seven international businesses, Erling and Walton (2007) explore English usage at work in Berlin. English is vital in every company analyzed, according to the research initiatives. English has evolved into a crucial quality in each of them, no longer just a valuable additional skill. Gimenez (2002) examines electronic-mediated communicative practices in two corporate settings: one in Europe and the other in Argentina, and argues that English is widely used in email for international communication with partner companies.

Embracing English as a business lingua franca (BELF) emerged based on English as a lingua franca (ELF), where English is used as a common language in business, Ehrenreich (2010) focuses on English communication needs in a German multinational corporation in the technology sector. Author 2 et al. (2005), Author 2 et al. (2010), and Author 2 and colleague (2010) discuss the use of English in European business contexts, particularly in Finland-based global operation business settings. In BELF discourse, three components are considered essential for successful BELF communication or getting the job done such as a) getting the facts right, b) making the discourse clear (e.g., explicitness, directness), c) and 'making the recipient feel good (e.g., politeness) (Author-2 et al. 2010). Later, inspired by the concept of Communicative Competence (CC) of several scholars (e.g., Chomsky, 1965; Canale & Swain, 1980), who specifically applied it to foreign language teaching and acquisition, Author-2 (2011, see also, Author-2 2013) developed a model of global communicative competence of internationally operating business professionals. The competence consists of three overlapping and intertwining layers: business know-how, BELF competence, and multicultural competence. The above studies offer a glimpse of increasing attention among researchers about the place of English in business communication, including both spoken and written discourse. Recognition of the importance of English in global business communication demonstrates the necessity for developing ECS by looking at the communicative needs of the business setting. To meet the demand for business communication, it is argued that higher education must produce graduates who meet and exceed the requirements of their chosen business industry (Kassim & Ali, 2010; Thomas, Piquette, & McMaster, 2016).

However, several studies identified the mismatch between skills acquired and skills needed in various workplaces (Bouzidi, 2009; Carté & Fox, 2008; Chan, 2014; Hellekjær & Fairway, 2015; König & Maškarin Ribarić, 2019; Tanveer, 2013; Kassim & Ali, 2010;). For example, in a needs analysis, Hellekjaer and Fairway (2015) found an unmet need for occupational English skills in Norway. They argued that Nordic universities should compete globally by incorporating language-learning goals into English medium courses and supplementing them with occupational English and communication courses. A study by Chan (2014) in Hong Kong explored the relevance of business English courses and the possible reasons for the discrepancy and identified that business English courses are not strongly related to workplace communication in different aspects, including course learning objectives, teaching topics, teaching materials, and assignments.

Against this backdrop, scholars repeatedly urge bridging gaps between universities and industry at different times (Bhatia & Bremner, 2012; Nunan, 1995; Tanveer, 2013). For example, about three decades ago, Nunan (1995) investigated the misalignment between the educational institution's pedagogical objectives and plans, curriculum, and textbook and the outcomes as realized through the knowledge that learners take away from an instructive encounter. The author demonstrates how to bridge the gap between experiential learning and language acquisition. One decade ago, Bhatia and Bremner (2012) advocated bridging workplace communicative needs and curriculum development of (Business) English communication courses in educational institutions. Bouzidi (2009) suggested bridging gaps between English classroom materials and workplace needs (e.g., the hospitality industry). Along with bridging gaps, several studies further emphasized the importance of empowering staff in the workplace with English language proficiencies and argued that there are advantages to English Medium Instruction (EMI) in workplaces. A recent study by Talauea and Kim (2020) in Indonesia indicates that studying in English medium may offer a competitive advantage in the workplace. Some others suggested offering education programs in English only, assuming that EMI enhances learners' overall English proficiencies (Li & Wu, 2017), which is in demand in business workplaces.

The above evidence is given in the different industries in different country contexts. Each business sector is unique, requiring specific and general communication needs that higher education needs to consider. Little research was found in the context of Bangladesh, a developing country in south Asia where English is taught from primary to higher education to develop English communication skills, which are widely required in workplaces including in international business. This paper aims to understand to what extent teaching ECS in higher education in Bangladesh is aligned with the communication needs of a global business. In particular, the study has addressed the following research questions:

1. How much is congruent between university and industry in teaching English communication skills and their needs in an international business?
2. How do different factors play a role in preparing or not preparing learners with English communication skills for international business communication?

This empirical study focuses on Readymade Garments (RMG) professionals' perceptions and views about the match and mismatch of English language teaching in higher education in Bangladesh for developing ECS and their communicative needs in the RMG business workplaces. The reason for choosing the RMG industry in Bangladesh is its economic and English communicative value in the industry. In Bangladesh, the RMG industry is the country's most significant export-oriented international business, supplying garment goods to more than 50 countries where communication happens in English with people from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. The communication needs for this business and preparing graduates with the necessary English communication skills for this business sector are relatively under-researched. It is argued that the research-informed approach to identifying and addressing needs aids in developing the module's linguistic content and a pedagogical model for business communication (Chan, 2018). Against this backdrop, the voices and views of RMG professionals are vital in helping higher education reconsider and develop English course curricula based on learners' communicative needs in general and RMG business in particular.

2. Literature Review: Teaching for business communication in higher education

Looking at the business communication needs of English at diverse workplaces in general and international business workplaces in particular, several authors have addressed the issues of English language teaching in higher education in different country contexts. Moslehifara and Ibrahim (2012) investigated the communication needs of human resources development (HRD) trainees in Malaysia. They identified that the most important activity in the English language is establishing social relationships with clients. It was suggested that skills such as conversation, oral presentation, and discussion be covered in English enhancement programs for HRD trainees to improve their English language skills. Likewise, Xie (2016) investigated English major undergraduates' business English communication needs. The findings indicate that more English-speaking needs and a wider range of English-writing genres are required. Participants appreciated the introductions to business knowledge and company cases. Presentations and role-playing, for example, were essential components of an effective business English curriculum. According to a study by Zhang (2014), China requires graduates to have business communication skills. While students understood the value of business English skills, course implementation presented difficulties for English teachers. Practical experience, business knowledge, and acumen were required to optimize in-class instruction and out-of-class resource provision. Earlier, Zhang's (2013) study findings show that Business

English students achieved a level of genre knowledge. Author 2 (2019) provides an example of the dynamics of teaching business contacts in a top European business school in Finland. The author suggested that because the BELF resource is so situation- and context-specific, it can only be measured through interactions. As a result, it asks for a foundation of traditional communication skills, business expertise, and intercultural understanding. Additionally, real-world experience helps business people improve and enhance their communication skills after graduation. Chan (2021) demonstrates how an eclectic and multidisciplinary approach was used in creating a work-integrated learning module for a group of English majors in Hong Kong. The paper contends that on-the-job learning of workplace communication merits more pedagogical innovation.

The research literature presented above was primarily conducted in Europe or some specific country context (e.g., Singapore, Malaysia, Hong Kong, Argentina), focusing on different business areas. Little attention has been paid to South Asian countries, particularly Bangladesh, a developing country, but it is leading in the world's export-oriented garments business. As a country of non-native speakers of English (NNSE), Bangladesh is doing business both locally and globally using English as a lingua franca (Author 1, 2018; 2021). To see how English is used in the RMG international business workplaces and how graduates are prepared for this industry, it is necessary to conduct studies in global business sites in Bangladesh. Underpinned by the above literature, this paper explores the alignment of teaching English in higher education, English communication needs in international business in general, and RMG international business communication specifically.

3. The context of the study: RMG industry and English communication skills

The Ready-made garment (RMG) industry in Bangladesh is the largest international business sector in the country and the second-largest garments exporter in the world with the brand name 'Made in Bangladesh' while China ranks first. It has been a rapidly booming sector over the last three decades, and it acts as a catalyst for the development of Bangladesh, accounting for 83% of the country's total export earnings. In the 2017-18 financial year, the export value of the RMG industry was over \$30.61 billion. Industry professionals need language for negotiating, selling a product, ordering equipment, or explaining production delays to customers. The language used in the RMG business communication can be characterized as BELF (Author-1, 2021) since it is used with business professionals worldwide (Author-1 and colleagues, 2022), while for local contact with Bangla-speaking people, Bangla is frequently used (Author 1, 2014).

A study by Author 1 (2021) found that RMG business communication requires mutual intelligibility, business-specific words, technical terms, acronyms, general words and pragmatic strategies. Though fluency as a spontaneous speech is the most frequently reported

skill by RMG professionals, most participants underscore 'pragmatic fluency' (House, 1996) or 'dialogic fluency' (Hüttner, 2009), where both speakers and listeners collaborate to ensure intelligibility. Simultaneously, the study indicates that disfluency with hesitation, repetition, and self-corrections (Lickley & Bard, 1998) does not play a significant role in miscommunication because various pragmatic competencies are used to bridge communication gaps (Author-1, 2014). Moreover, whether grammatical competence is 'important, 'not important, or 'less important, is relative and depends on the professionals' roles in the sector and depends on the means of communication - spoken and written. Producing a native-like accent and pronunciation is unnecessary, but it plays a significant role in intelligibility (see also Author-1, 2014; Author-1 & Colleagues, 2022).

Business personnel who come to this industry to work as professionals commonly graduated from various public (total n=53) and private (total n=103) universities in Bangladesh, where they learned English as a compulsory subject to develop their ECS. One of our authors' teaching experience in higher education in Bangladesh and the analysis of the course curricula suggest that the English courses are designed to strengthen students' communicative competence with ability in all four basic language skills, i.e., listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Unsurprisingly, all English courses stress grammatical competence. In addition, these English courses (s) emphasize various types of letters and applications and essay writing. Along with teaching English, universities offer a business communication course for business students to develop their business communication skills, both spoken and written. In developing written communication skills, the courses include various business letters, applications, memos, and resumes and their styles, structures, characteristics, advantages, and disadvantages. By contrast, the oral skills course includes debate competitions, face-to-face conversations, interviews, meetings, public speaking, and oral presentations. Apart from oral and written communication, business communication courses have taken into account nonverbal communication, intercultural communication, and communication through technology. Because of the substantial opening up of international business and trade (Dudley-Evans & John, 1998; Piekkari, Welch & Welch, 2014), many universities in other countries offer English for Specific Purposes (ESP) (Brown, 2016; Hyland, 2007) or English for Business Purposes (EBP) that has significant growth worldwide, in the early 2020s no university in Bangladesh offers those specialized English courses for business communication.

Like many non-native English-speaking countries, Bangladesh's education policy is flexible and suggests universities use either English or Bangla in teaching any discipline. Public universities have embraced either "Bangla," "bilingual," or "a balance of Bangla and English" (Hamid, Jahan, and Islam, 2013; Rahman, Singh, and Karim, 2020; Rafi & Morgan, 2022a). However, English is largely welcomed as a medium of instruction in private higher education.

4. Methodology

Based on the perceptions and experiences of the RMG business employers and employees, a qualitative case-study approach was chosen to examine the alignment between teaching English in higher education and ECS required in the RMG international business communication. This is part of a large-scale research project conducted in the RMG industry in Bangladesh in (2014). Participants were selected from different RMG firms based on 'purposive sampling.' In selecting participants, the study used a planned approach to assess the diversity of participants to reflect the types of work roles and forms of communication expected of professionals working in the RMG industry and people with different levels of experience and university qualifications. The focus of the study was to collect rich and in-depth data to maximize information about the phenomenon under investigation to address the purpose of the study and answer the research questions (Pitney & Parker, 2009). Therefore, data were finally collected from 43 participants through interviews, and sampling continued until we reached a point of saturation or redundancy (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 1998). It gained access to 29 globally operating RMG industries located in the capital city of Dhaka (chosen for its significance for this industry and convenience) in different categories (i.e., large, medium, and small; knit, woven, and sweater industries). These industries manufacture garments goods in Bangladesh and supply these to different countries in the world. The data collection depended on quality rather than quantity (Padgett, 1998). The sample size is shown in Table 1 below:

[Table 1 will be here]

Data were collected from three types of participants bearing official titles: 'marketing', 'merchandising', and 'commercial' personnel involved in different professional functions of the RMG businesses in which English is needed. The classification of these three types is generic and well-established in the RMG sector in Bangladesh. Table 1 identifies the number of participants in each type of role and uses the working title they held to indicate their level of authority in the organization. Although they are involved in regular interaction and communication in English with international buyers and suppliers in the RMG business, the nature of communication and their involvement is different, which necessitates the relative need for ECS. We have analyzed and compared data from the views of these three groups of RMG personnel. Before moving on, it is helpful to briefly introduce and describe the role of the above three types of personnel. Although their roles are interconnected and slightly overlapping, there are specific activities and work areas they are engaged in. For instance, some are more involved in written than verbal communication, and some are engaged in local communication, while some are involved in international settings with buyers and suppliers abroad where English as the contact language is highly expected. Figure 1 summarizes their roles.

[Figure 1 will be here]

Most participants (22) graduated from Arts and Social science disciplines, followed by Business (16) and Science (5). While more than three-quarters (36) studied either Bachelor's or Master's at public universities, a minority group (7) studied at private universities.

The overall work experience of participants ranged from less than five years to thirty years. The age of participants ranged from 25 to over 50 years, and the majority belonged to the 31 to 35 age group. Though participants were educated at universities at different times, they are well aware of the graduates' ECS through their interactions with them in various capacities. Interestingly, the sampling method in this study resulted in only one female participant. This indicates that while more than 80% of workers are female in the RMG sector, the number of female executives has been very few until recently due to several reasons, including lack of work-life balance, patriarchal and bureaucratic structure, cultural influences such as gender stereotyping and lack of self-confidence (Islam et al., 2018).

A total of 43 face-to-face, one-on-one in-depth interviews were conducted. Utilizing semi-structured interviews, participants were requested to express their experience about 'their own performance in the RMG workplaces to identify how they perceived the congruence between university and industry in developing skills through English course(s) needed for RMG business communication. Although the interview protocol was written in English, participants were allowed to use their preferred language in the interview. Most used Bangla, which was their mother tongue. Using Bangla in the interview helped them to articulate and provide more information.

Nonetheless, some participants gave full interviews in English, while others started their English interview but ended in Bangla. The duration of the interviews was between 30-50 minutes. The responses of the participants were digitally recorded. Most of the interviews were taken in respondents' workplaces at their convenience, while some were conducted in other suitable places, i.e., participants' homes or offices or in a reserved spot in a restaurant. Assurance of confidentiality was given to every participant. They signed a consent form to take part in interviews. The interviews were transcribed and translated by the lead researcher into English. After transcribing, all interview transcription files were imported (in MS Word) into NVivo 9 software. All transcripts were read through to sort extracts into codes (e.g., nature of English teaching, English in private or public university, medium of instruction, family and personal role, workplace learning, skills helpful or not valuable for the corporate setting, quality education). Initial codes called 'nodes' were generated. In the coding process, codes were repeatedly checked to evaluate intercoder reliability (O'Connor & Joffe, 2020) to promote researcher reflexivity (Joffe & Yardley, 2003). The process of coding was 'data driven' rather

than 'theory driven' (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Reading through the texts of each node, different nodes were sorted into subthemes (e.g., medium of instructions, family role, personal role). Then from subthemes, major themes (matches, partially matches and not matches) were developed that aligned with the research questions stated above.

To maintain rigor and trustworthiness (Nowell, Norris, White, & Moules, 2017), data were collected from multiple sources—three groups of participants (marketing, merchandising, and commercial staff) and data analysis was conducted in a precise, consistent, and exhaustive manner through a systematic process to promote the credibility of the findings (Ryan, Coughlan, & Cronin, 2007). This research also provided a thick, rich description of the setting, participants, and themes (Creswell & Miller, 2000). The descriptions are abundant and interconnected (Stake, 2010). Similarly, the meaning was constructed by exclusively relying on the data set as a whole collection that reflects the validity of the individual themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

5. Findings of the study

The participants' responses show that participants have diverse views clustered into three major themes that reflected the broader similarities and differences between university and industry in graduate preparedness aligned with RMG international business communication needs - BELF competence.

5.1 Education preparation does not align with business communication needs

More than half of the RMG professionals (n=25), including marketing, merchandising, and commercial staff, stated that there is an incongruence between university and industry in preparing graduates with the requisite ECS for the RMG industry. They opposed English courses taught in public and private universities, emphasizing the lack of practical experience. They argued that university-level English courses are structured to establish theoretical knowledge (e.g., grammatical aspects) far removed from practical application. They said that since students do not acquire practical experience with English during their university studies, they would have difficulty communicating with their international counterparts when they enter the RMG field with only theoretical knowledge. In response to this point, a commercial participant (Participant 32) said, "*Students learn many things at university except experience. It is important to have prior experience. They would do well in their professional lives if they gain experience at university.*" Their experience can supplement institutional knowledge, and by combining theoretical knowledge and experience, they may be able to communicate effectively in business.

Another commercial participant (P40) challenged the entire education system in Bangladesh from the point of developing ECS while explaining the disparity between university and industry practices. He clarified that nowadays, everything is communicated in English, from banking to shipping lines, whereas the education system, particularly the public education system of Bangladesh, emphasizes learning in Bangla. He proposed that education providers rethink their policies on the medium of instruction and move to English from Bangla in public universities and improve students' ECS and subject awareness simultaneously.

Concurrently, describing incongruities between university and industry, participants (n=13) explained that the spoken and written ECS students achieve at university is insufficient for RMG business communication. While citing examples, they explained that graduates were not fluent enough to communicate with buyers, and their writing did not convey a clear message. As seen in BELF literature, though fluency and clarity are essential issues in BELF communication, clarity rather than fluency is considered a better success factor in BELF communication (Author-2 & Colleague, 2013; Author-2 & Colleague, 2010). Since multiple strategic competencies are used to bridge communication gaps, disfluency plays no significant role in miscommunication (Author-1, 2021). A merchandiser (P16) shared his personal experience as a former public university student and current business employee in the RMG sector when describing teaching English in a university:

Though I am unfamiliar with all universities, as a student at [the] N University [Pseudonym, NU in short], I believe it is insufficient and does not meet my workplace requirements. We must concentrate on improving our fluency. Also, students from [the] English department learn English but cannot speak or write correctly. What we learn in a university English course does not correspond to real-world requirements. When I was a student at NU, there was a 100-point English course focused on grammar. In any case, it will not be able to meet my needs at work. The course should help students improve their fluency, but this course is unable to do so. As a result, what [the] university teaches is inadequate.

NU is Bangladesh's largest public university in terms of student numbers, but it is not the highest in terms of academic efficiency. The vast majority of the study's participants were NU graduates. They expressed their dissatisfaction with the English course, the teaching and learning process, and the atmosphere, all of which were deemed inappropriate for the graduates' proper development of ECS. Their English course, in their view, is quite traditional in that it emphasizes memorizing grammatical rules, and students usually focus on passing examinations. As a result, participants did not consider English a course for improving ECS. As a result, many participants reported that when they were recruited to the RMG workplace

after graduation, they had difficulty communicating with their international counterparts, both verbally and in writing.

Participants, especially marketing staff, expressed their deep frustration with ECS taught in universities from the standpoint of quality education. Among them, a marketing professional (P10), who began his career as a schoolteacher and later became a manager in an RMG firm, stated that the English language taught in higher education would not meet the needs of any industry. He referred to Bangladesh's educational priorities, which place a premium on quantity rather than quality. He said, "Many students have honors and master's degrees, but their language quality is not comparable to that of lower secondary students. In education, there is a flaw in the standard". Evidence shows a dearth of quality in English language teaching (ELT) caused by inconsistent language policy and planning (Hamid, 2010). As a result, in today's internationally competitive labor markets, academic credentials or degrees cannot be sufficient to provide a route to high-level positions or professional outcomes (Tomlinson, 2008).

Why current university education is not adequately meeting the needs of the RMG industry was further revealed in the voices of two professionally experienced marketing participants (P2&7). One had a double degree in English and Business, while another had a business degree and worked in two careers simultaneously – in the RMG field and as a professor at a well-known public university. They both mentioned that the needs of the RMG business sector were not included in the higher education curriculum when training graduates to be future professionals. Furthermore, graduates who enter this industry as professionals do so with no previous knowledge of the industry or how to manage contacts. This finding indicates the know-how – the knowledge and skills in business communication strategies (e.g., clarity, brevity, directness, and politeness'), which are considered success factors of business communication (Author-2 & Colleague, 2013). The graduates may have English language skills; nevertheless, they do not know the RMG industry or its communication requirements because higher education's explicit goal in Bangladesh is to grow students as human resources in general (see Ministry of Education, 2010), not specifically for the RMG industry.

Data analysis further reveals that as there are gaps between the skills taught at university and skills required in the RMG industry, RMG workplaces have conventions to train their employees, especially newcomers at the workplace, informally. Through the community of practice, under the supervision of a senior colleague, they learn how to write to a customer, converse in a meeting, negotiate with buyers, and above all, how to deal with a customer, both in verbal and written English. If these professional 'apprentices' make any mistakes, they receive feedback from their seniors and colleagues. Besides, they learn by reading and investigating previous documents. Such member guidance in the community of practice (Lave

and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) dramatically helps these apprentices to develop their ECS (see, Author-1 & Colleague, 2013 for details).

5.2 High-quality education prepares graduates for business communication

A large number of participants (n=11) who served in the RMG industry in all three roles (marketing, merchandising, and commercial roles) were sceptics in expressing their opinions, and they were unable to express their satisfaction or dissatisfaction with university education in terms of preparing students/professionals for the RMG sector with required ECS. They stated that there is yet to be a definitive response to whether university education corresponds to RMG industry needs in terms of ECS. Instead, they asserted that specific determinants (such as educational quality, medium of instruction, and family histories) play a role.

These participants claimed that graduates who obtained good English instruction have adequate communication skills and perform well in business communication. However, they did admit that not all universities uphold the same level of educational quality; somewhat, it differs from university to university. The standard of education, they believe, is determined by whether the institution is public or private.

Although some participants expressed satisfaction with private universities preparing graduates with appropriate ECS expertise for the RMG industry, others expressed satisfaction with public universities. Simultaneously, while praising private universities for developing a suitable level of ECS, some participants challenged the standard of education at public universities for developing students' ECS. According to one of the marketing professionals (P5) who graduated from a public university (such as NU),

I am pleased with the standard of graduates from private universities in several ways. Except for a few highly preferred subjects like English or an MBA from DU [Pseudonym], I am very disappointed in public universities regarding their quality or standard.

Despite his disappointment with ECS in particular and with the education of graduates from public universities in general, this participant, as the director of his industry, had recruited some graduates from public universities into his business. He thought these graduates were outstanding in their English abilities. He believes it may be due to individual or family efforts through informal and non-formal learning rather than university education. It demonstrates that, in addition to universities, learning the language beyond the classroom (Benson, 2011; Reinders & Benson, 2017), such as families and training institutions, are regarded as crucial social education institutions that can contribute to developing English competence. These results also show that developing ECS is not solely a university's responsibility; the family also

plays a role. Here, "family role" indicates the family's education, socio-economic background, and support. Participants show that graduates from educated families likely have better ECS in many cases. Similarly, people seeking additional English training or coaching have better communication skills. Some of them suggested doing an English course personally at the British Council, which offers a Business English course for professionals in Bangladesh. Moreover, one marketing participant (P10) indicated that using out-of-classroom resources and open-access materials for learning English (e.g., International English Language Testing System (IELTS) materials/YouTube videos) may facilitate many graduates' further development of English communications skills. Despite his satisfaction, the marketing participant was sceptical about generalizing all private universities in Bangladesh in providing quality education and developing the requisite ECS for successful business communication in the above statement. Other participants, including him, did not generalize toward all private universities providing high-quality education. Instead, they indicated a small number of private universities that provided students with quality education, including better English communication skills.

While some participants were satisfied with the quality of graduates from private universities, others expressed dissatisfaction. For example, a commercial manager (P43) stated:

The situation is worse at private universities, which are very commercial. They are more serious about selling certificates than providing education. One graduate from a private university works at my company. I am doubtful of the education that he received from a private university.

In contrast to the commercial participant who expressed reservations about graduates from private universities, one marketing participant (P11) who attended a prestigious public university expressed his satisfaction with students from public universities and reported that the ECS taught at public universities is sufficient for students to do their jobs in the RMG industry. It would seem that participants perceived that within the public university sector, some courses and students are a better fit than others.

Participants also brought up the issue of English-medium versus Bangla-medium education. As previously mentioned, the medium of instruction, also known as the medium of teaching and learning, plays a role in the growth of ECS. Some participants brought up this point in response to the question of whether ECS taught at university is aligned or not. According to them, students who studied in the English medium had strong ECS for the RMG market. According to a commercial participant (P39), students who studied in the English medium were much more advanced than their Bangla medium counterparts. Simultaneously, some of the participants voiced their displeasure with Bangla medium graduates. A marketing professional

(P9) opined *"I am sorry to say that I am disappointed with the graduates from the Bangla medium because the students of Bangla medium usually lack English because of the Bangla medium"*. Participants also have raised concerns about the curriculum and syllabus, as well as the teaching and learning process, which is mostly memorization-based, examination-oriented and detached from real-life practical needs. As a result, the skills acquired by Bangla medium students at their universities were deemed unsuitable for the RMG industry. According to one commercial participant (P37), *"If everybody is like me, the situation is bleak. I had an aversion to English, which I overcame with the help of my coaching tutor, who helped me practice speaking the English language"*. It was reported that students in almost all departments, except English and a few special departments, are taught in Bangla. As a result, the ECS developed by Bangla medium graduates is insufficient for international communication in the RMG industry.

However, a merchandise manager (P21) who attended a specialized university for the RMG sector that offers professional courses to its graduates argued that the issue might not be due to the syllabus. He thought the syllabus was possibly up to date, but the issue was more likely to be the resources, specifically the "right" teachers. Similarly, a merchandising manager (P25) argued that those who relied exclusively on university services rather than organizations such as the British Council, which provides Business English courses, were obviously at a disadvantage. According to this merchandise manager, students who put in less effort in class can also be concerned and must take responsibility for their learning. He said that many students do not understand the value of ECS while they are students; however, they do when they reach the business workplace. Finally, he believed that while the information he acquired at university is insufficient, there are numerous opportunities for self-development in ECS. He said that higher education is not the be-all and end-all of education. Instead, people need to keep continuing their skills development process. This participant indicated that developing ECS is a continuing and lifelong process.

5.3 Education provision is sufficiently aligned with business communication

A small group of participants (n=7), particularly the merchandising personnel, opined a sufficient congruence in the ECS developed in their higher education and the needs of the RMG business communication. One of the merchandising participants (P22) stated: *"Yes, there is [a] match. I do not find [any] mismatch."* They observed what they had learned at university that they applied to the RMG workplace. For instance, a merchandiser (P30), who studied in a private university where the medium of education was English, stated: *"My MBA at a private university, which was fully in English, helps me to use English in this sector."* This participant indicated that English as a medium of instruction, rather than a language course in his higher education, facilitated him to be competent in English. It later supported him in this business workplace to communicate and work with international counterparts. This participant and some

of the other participants expressed similar views. They highlighted the importance of prioritizing English as the medium of education in private universities and business courses, particularly in the BBA and MBA. Not all participants had been to private universities and had done BBA and MBA, yet their experiential learning in the industry constructed this understanding.

Along with describing the university's role in preparing graduates with ECS that corresponds to RMG needs, two commercial participants (P34&43) in this cohort argued that the garment sector in Bangladesh did not need a high level of English language skills. Instead, they stated that if RMG professionals can explain business matters satisfactorily to buyers and understand their international colleagues' messages, this would be enough for the industry. These two participants worked in commercial roles where English is required relatively less than the other two positional roles (e.g., marketing and merchandising roles) in the RMG business sector. Accordingly, they likely placed greater emphasis on intelligibility in the sense of interpretability rather than accuracy of communication. To them, negotiating to understand (interpretability) is perceived as the main target of communication. As communication is reciprocal and contextual, production and reception are essential regarding intelligibility among interlocutors (Seidlhofer, 2001; Wang & Jenkins, 2016). In their consideration, university graduates were able to do this task. Consequently, they believed that the ECS provided by universities was enough for graduates working in this industry. In this regard, a marketing person (P3) with much experience in RMG business communication stated: "*...what they [universities] are teaching is enough... university has nothing to do.*"

6. Discussion

This study explored the congruence between the university and RMG industry in teaching ECS to prepare students to be future professionals with ECS and how far these ECS match with the RMG international business communication needs. Based on the findings, this study identified several points to discuss. Underscoring the participants' voices, a conclusion can be drawn that teaching English to develop graduates' ECS cannot adequately meet the RMG international business communication needs. The study identified several factors that influence whether or not graduates are prepared with the necessary ECS. Firstly, the findings reveal that English as a medium of education was observed to determine whether a university prepares graduates with the necessary ECS. This finding indicates that institutions that offer English courses using EMI play a significant role in developing the ECS of graduates for international business communication. These findings suggest that English should be the medium of instruction in higher education for developing the ECS of learners for professional business communication because better language proficiency of English medium graduates constitutes their identity as better communicators. To make graduates more fluent in English as a part of ECS, higher education could be encouraged to use English as the medium of instruction.

However, what should be the medium of instruction in higher education is a controversial issue addressed in the literature (Kirkpatrick, 2014). Undoubtedly EMI in higher education has multiple benefits, including developing English language proficiency (Doiz, Lasagabaster, & Sierra, 2011; Galloway, Kriukow & Numajiri, 2017; Macaro, Curle, Pun, An, & Dearden, 2018). Accordingly, it is seen that there has been a substantial increase in the number of universities around the world moving to deliver courses and programs in English, as reported and discussed in several recent publications (Doiz, Lasagabaster, & Sierra, 2013; Komori-Glatz and Schmidt-Unterberger, 2018; Tsou & Kao, 2017). However, there are also several demerits of EMI policy in higher education that includes proficiency challenge of staff and students, negative impact on national language(s), slow progress in learning, and controversial impacts on local cultural (e.g., Englishization, Westernisation, inequalities) (Galloway, Kriukow & Numajiri, 2017; Joe & Lee, 2013) among others. Hence, there are numerous reasons to promote using the L1 or a mother tongue in the foreign language classroom (Littlewood & Yu, 2011). One of the key reasons found in research is that people learn the best in their first language (Nation, 2003). The L1 serves as a solid bridge for the L2 (Macaro, 2009). According to Macaro (2009), it can be much more successful in getting meanings across by offering translations of complex grammatical concepts and vocabulary pieces than by attempting to clarify them in English. Against this backdrop, Kirkpatrick (2014) suggested that universities of the Asia Pacific region reconsider their medium of instruction policy and take into account English as a lingua franca (ELF), encouraging bi- and multilingualism within the university. The education policy of higher education in Bangladesh also provided flexible guidelines for choosing the medium of instruction in higher education, either English or Bangla, or both (Ministry of Education, 2010). However, challenging prevailing theories of bilingualism and multilingualism that demonstrate colonial and modernist-era language ideologies, scholars (Garca & Lin, 2017; Garca & Kleyn, 2016) are recently advocating translanguaging as a language pedagogy in bilingual and multilingual education contexts for its fluidity. Translanguaging as a pedagogical approach allows students to engage more deeply with complex topics and texts (Vogel, S., & Garca, 2017) and enhance their language learning and quality content acquisition alongside co-constructing bilingual identities (García, 2011; Rafi & Morgan, 2022b). Considering the strength of translanguaging along with the bilingual identity of Bangladeshi learners, Rafi and Morgan (2022a) advocate the promotion of translanguaging pedagogies as “learning and teaching style, and curriculum planning” (Lewis, Jones, & Baker 2012, p. 650) in higher education classrooms to improve Bangladeshi students' language and subject learning. However, this current research promotes an English-only policy in higher education in Bangladesh.

Secondly, from a curriculum and students' perspective, the findings identified contradictory purposes of teaching and learning English in higher education in Bangladesh. This finding

suggests that the aim of English language learning from the student's perspective is to successfully pass the exam, which is quite different from the curriculum perspective, where the aim is to develop communicative competence (Canale & Swain, 1980) to connect locally and globally. It is not unusual that in many ELF contexts, passing the examinations is the central objective of many learners (Ansarey, 2012; Taguchi, 2013; Tsou, 2015). However, English for practical or real-life use varies obviously from English for passing tests (Takino, 2019). Hence, when users interact in an international business setting using ELF, their primary focus is to translate business messages to counterparts, but their primary focus is linguistic appropriateness when they learn English in the classroom (Takino, 2019). Hence, Author 2 (2019) argued that the ELF resource differs from "English," a language system that is thought to dwell in textbooks and dictionaries ontologically. Moreover, as participants indicated that it is little or no scope or environment for practicing English language skills outside of class, existing literature, therefore, suggests that in the ELF context promoting English language competence, students need to hear and use English as much as possible, particularly when there are few opportunities to do so outside of class (Kirkpatrick, 2014).

Thirdly, the findings also indicate whether graduates are ready or not depending on the university's quality of education. If the university can provide quality education to students, graduates can prepare for the communication needs of the RMG industry. Otherwise, it cannot. However, in their opinions, quality education is associated with several factors, including the type of university (public or private), medium of instruction, etc. Quality in education is a slippery term, and achieving quality education for developing ECS is challenging. Unlike the study's findings, the literature suggests that achieving quality education involves several factors, including sound curriculum, pedagogy, materials, teachers, etc. Existing literature also indicates that the fundamental cause of problems in international business communication is professionals' lack of business communication skills (see Author-2 & Colleague, 2013) and suggests redesigning curriculum, courses, textbooks, pedagogies, and assessment in light of BELF. Regarding ELF content, for example, to ensure quality education, Qiufang (2012) suggested teaching at least four strands: linguistic elements, intercultural aspects, discourse components, and pragmatic components.

Likewise, concerning pedagogical aspects, several researchers (Author-2 et al., 2015; Pitzl & Ehrenreich, 2015; Pullin, 2015) suggest teaching and developing BELF competence that calls for clarity and accuracy of content (rather than linguistic correctness) and knowledge of business-specific vocabulary and genre conventions (rather than only "general" English) (Author 2 & colleague, 2010) through the formal education system using, for example, cases, role plays, and authentic business texts. However, Author-2 (2008; also Author-2 & Colleague, 2013) argued that – in the end - the best school to learn BELF competence is learning-on-the-job or formal and informal workplace learning (Manuti, Pastore, Scardigno, Giancaspro, &

Morciano, 2015), while Eraut (2000) advocated for non-formal learning and tacit knowledge in professional work. Moving further, Bouzidi (2009) suggested bridging gaps between (ESP) classrooms and the workplace needs (e.g., Hospitality industry). Earlier publication (Author-1 & Colleague, 2013) shows that RMG business professionals develop their business communication skills better in the RMG workplace informally under the supervision of a senior employee through learning by doing rather than formally in higher education institutions. Once they are ready to communicate, they are engaged in business communication. This article also suggests bridging gaps between the university and business industry through building a partnership where the contents aspect of ECS will be learned in the classroom. In contrast, practical experience will be gained in the business workplace through an internship or work-integrated learning (Chan, 2021; Author 1 & Colleague, 2013) as a part of the or English curriculum. This process might develop 'work-ready BELF professionals' worthy of business communication in the RMG sector particularly.

Though universities in Bangladesh offer general English courses, no university in the country offers a 'Business English' or 'ESP' course, which poses challenges to preparing graduates as future business professionals (Author-1, 2014). Scholars argue that teaching Business English aims to cultivate business expertise, offering a tripartite curriculum (e.g., business knowledge, business discourse, and business practice) rather than just teaching language skills. At the same time, ESP is designed to meet the learner's specific needs centring on the language (grammar, lexis, and register), skills, discourse, and genres appropriate to these activities (Zhang, 2007). However, the polarization in discussing and suggesting different teaching approaches in higher education is between general English on the one hand, and English for the specific international business industry, on the other. Based on these findings, we suggest a reasonable middle point between these two ends: teaching English for general business purposes (Hsu, 2002). It is more realistic for higher education, which aims at preparing globally-minded business graduates in many contexts (e.g., in the European context). Therefore, suggesting tailoring business English courses to a specific industry as recommended could be useful for contexts similar to the RMG industry in Bangladesh. However, in our view, today's business teachers cannot only focus on one specific local context because the demands of education in a globalized world are quite different.

[Figure 2 will be here]

This study has implications for developing a framework for teaching English in higher education for business communication purposes to develop international business CC in English (see Figure 2). This study suggests bridging gaps between university and industry in terms of the purpose of teaching English. Moreover, the study suggests teaching those competencies required in the international business industry because merely teaching general English may not serve specific needs. In teaching English, the study advocates selecting

appropriate content, such as linguistic and intercultural elements and business know-how, rather than merely grammatical items. The pedagogical learning model needs to combine theory and practice where theoretical knowledge, such as how to communicate effectively, both spoken and written, will be learned at universities. In contrast, practical experience, such as how to use ECS in action, will be gained in business workplaces through work-integrated learning (Cooper, Orrell & Bowden, 2010; Berndtsson, Dahlborg, & Pennbrant, 2020) or internship under the supervision of skilled business professionals (Cheong et al., 2014; Author 1 & Colleague, 2013) as part of the English language curriculum. As the medium of instruction is considered a vital issue in developing fluency and competence, the medium of instruction should be English. Finally, along with using business communication textbooks, and relevant research articles, it is necessary to use workplace business dealing materials (e.g., emails, negotiation videos, communication videos) as instructional materials at university to make the learning more realistic and practical.

7. Conclusion

Albeit RMG is the largest sector of international business in Bangladesh, it is largely ignored in university education. This study shows that the ECS that graduates receive in higher education, to a large extent, is unlikely to meet the needs of the RMG industry. However, the students who succeed can often draw on personal efforts, resources, and family support to improve their English skills. Higher education needs to recognize this fact and prepare graduates with adequate specialized ECS relevant to both general and specific business sectors and with a solid competence in English required for their future career and professional tasks in local and global contexts. This research implies that higher education needs to be more pragmatic and bridge gaps between university and industry in teaching ECS at university and their needs in international business communication in the BELF setting.

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