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Beyond Needs Analysis: Occupational English, Professional Visibility, and Multilingual Repertoire Use among Garment Merchandisers in Bangladesh

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Abstract

Merchandisers in Bangladesh's ready-made garment industry deal with buyers mostly in English though coordinate production mostly in Bangla. ESP research on the sector has catalogued their language needs and skill gaps: It has not asked how these demands are lived, or what communicative performance does to professional standing. The study draws on eight semi-structured interviews and a focus group of four merchandisers (N = 12) from garment factories and buying houses in Chattogram, analysed through reflexive thematic analysis. Email, as participants said, left time for planning and accuracy checks. Synchronous buyer meetings left none, demanding instant lexical retrieval and composure under commercial scrutiny. English also decided whether technical expertise reached managers and buyers; Direct buyer contact signalled growing autonomy and credit for a solution tended to go to whoever explained it best. I propose *English-mediated professional visibility* as an analytic concept for this mechanism. Participants also described managing repertoires by audience and urgency, with formal English for buyers, Bangla with embedded English terms internally and mixed resources in digital messaging. Practices reported rather than observed carry two implications: needs analysis should treat communicative events as sites of evaluation and EOP provision should be event-specific, career-staged and repertoire-aware.

Keywords: English for Occupational Purposes; Workplace Communication; Professional Visibility; Multilingual Repertoires; Garment Merchandising; Bangladesh

Introduction

Most of the export income that Bangladesh earns mainly comes from the ready-made garment (RMG) industry supplies. Several million people work in its factories; buy houses and liaison offices (Islam & Islam, 2018; Swazan & Das, 2022). Its competitiveness turns on three things: price, lead time and quality. Each is negotiated inside what Gereffi (1994) termed a buyer-driven commodity chain, in which international retailers and brands

fix specifications, prices and delivery schedules for suppliers spread across several countries. Merchandisers sit at the boundary of that arrangement. They turn buyers' commercial and technical requirements, along with their compliance demands, into production plans. They also answer to buyers for whatever happens on the factory floor (Chowdhury & Anon, 2021; Frazier & Cheek, 2016). Most of this boundary work is done in English, through email, video meetings and technical documentation. The occupation therefore exemplifies what English for Occupational Purposes (EOP) research sets out to understand, namely the language through which consequential professional work gets done (Li So-mui & Mead, 2000; Roshid et al., 2022).

ESP research on merchandising has mostly asked one question. What English does the job require? Li So-mui and Mead (2000) identified the written and spoken genres through which buyer relationships are conducted. Islam and Ahmad's (2025) needs analysis of Bangladeshi apparel merchandisers found that email and video conferencing dominate daily English use. The same study found speaking and professional writing to be stubborn difficulties, and reported that practitioners prefer training embedded in the workplace. Studies of employer expectations record much the same gap between graduates' English and the demands of international business (Khan & Chaudhury, 2012; Roshid & Kankaanranta, 2025).

What this work was not designed to explain is how practitioners experience these demands. Three questions remain open. First, needs analyses classify demands by skill. Yet the same content, a production delay for instance, may pose quite different problems in a drafted email and in a live explanation to a buyer. Second, little is known about how communicative performance bears on credibility and career progression, including access to buyer-facing responsibility. Third, merchandisers stand between buyers who work in English and production teams who work in Bangla; that multilingual mediation seldom appears in EOP needs analyses or in course design. Belcher (2006) urged ESP to look ahead, to learners' imagined futures and to the social worlds they hope to join. Taking that argument seriously, the study treats occupational communication as situated professional practice. It is not a bundle of separable skills.

The study is based on ESP/EOP. The evidence it offers is based on interviews and a focus group with 12 merchandisers in Chattogram, which is one of the major hubs for RMGs in the country. This is why Norton's (2013) concept of investment is helpful in understanding the value placed on English-mediated participation and its uneven distribution. The discussion on professional adaptation presented by Ibarra, (1999), follows the transition from supervised to autonomous communicative performance. The use of reported repertoire is read through the lens of translanguaging scholarship (Canagarajah, 2013; García & Li, 2014). It is participants' account of the data, not recorded account of interaction, so it is the study of the experience and report of communicative events. Three questions guided the work:

RQ1: Which communicative demands do RMG merchandisers report facing in key buyer-facing occupational genres and interactions?

RQ2: How do merchandisers describe the role of occupational English in their professional credibility, responsibility, autonomy, and career progression?

RQ3: In buyer-facing and internal workplace communication, how do merchandisers report using Bangla, English, and mixed linguistic resources, and what do these reported practices imply for EOP provision?

The study makes three contributions. The first is to show that the asynchronous–synchronous distinction, more than a broad writing–speaking split, organises merchandisers' experience of occupational demands. A second is *English-mediated professional visibility*, an analytic concept for how communicative performance governs the recognition of expertise. Finally, the study documents reported repertoire management that bears directly on EOP provision in multilingual workplaces.

Literature Review

From Target-Situation Analysis to Occupational Communication as Situated Practice

Ever since Munby's (1978) communicative syllabus design and Hutchinson and Waters's (1987) learning-centred approach, needs analysis has sat at the centre of ESP. Both established that instruction should derive from systematic analysis of learners' target situations. EOP was later located in the communicative demands of professional work (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998). Mature needs analyses triangulate several sources, from questionnaires and interviews to observation and authentic texts (Flowerdew, 2013). The same logic informs needs analyses in other high-stakes occupations, such as the maritime English that Bangladeshi seafarers require (Ahmmed et al., 2020).

A second strand approaches occupational language through genre. Swales (1990) defined genres as communicative events whose shared purposes are recognised by the expert members of a discourse community. Bhatia (2004) added that professional genres can be interpreted only in relation to the institutional practices in which they are used. Workplace studies within ESP have also shown that language use varies by channel and audience. In Hong Kong, written English was the norm for professional correspondence, while spoken workplace communication ran largely in Cantonese (Evans, 2010). Business professionals using English as a lingua franca judged communication by whether it got the work done rather than by native-speaker correctness (Kankaanranta & Louhiala-Salminen, 2010).

Belcher's (2006) call to attend to the identity-laden dimensions of specific-purpose language use extends these concerns. The present study takes a correspondingly event-oriented view. It treats buyer email, delay notification, video meetings, internal briefings

and digital messaging as distinct communicative events, each with its own audience and stakes and its own temporal conditions. Rather than analysing authentic texts, it addresses the experiential and evaluative side of occupational genres, which needs analysis identifies but does not examine.

English in Bangladesh's RMG Sector

Li So-mui and Mead's (2000) study of Hong Kong graduates working as textile and clothing merchandisers set an influential, workplace-based model for identifying merchandisers' communication needs. Islam and Ahmad (2025) later confirmed persistent speaking and writing gaps among Bangladeshi merchandisers. Research elsewhere likewise treats occupation-specific communication as a core merchandising competence, alongside technical knowledge (Frazier & Cheek, 2016; Jacobs & Karpova, 2023).

Employers have reported dissatisfaction with graduates' English (Khan & Chaudhury, 2012), and skill gaps have been identified in RMG management roles (Islam & Islam, 2018). Employers hiring for entry-level apparel marketing rate communicative competence highly (Chowdhury & Anon, 2021). Roshid and Kankaanranta (2025) drew on forty-three personnel in Bangladesh's international RMG business and found university preparation out of step with the intelligibility-oriented communication the industry actually needs. In an earlier analysis of Bangladeshi business email, Roshid et al. (2022) showed English working as a lingua franca in which task completion and relationship maintenance outweigh native-speaker norms.

Some shortfalls begin upstream, in higher secondary materials that offer limited provision for sustained listening and speaking practice (Ullah, 2023a). These studies also sit within a policy context that promotes English as a resource for development and mobility despite uneven capacity to deliver it (Hamid, 2020). English, within that context, still organises linguistic hierarchies and unequal access (Ullah, in press). Bangladeshi employers also seem to take fluency and confidence as proxies for wider competence; job advertisements for EFL teachers show a similar pattern (Alam et al., 2023). So the literature is fairly clear about what English merchandisers need. It is quieter on how English performance shapes professional evaluation once practitioners are in post, and on how English sits alongside Bangla in daily merchandising work.

Occupational English, Access, and Professional Becoming

Two frameworks that focus on identity can help to account for the significance of occupational English beyond task accomplishment. The concept of investment is introduced in this book by Norton (2013) who refers to it as a relationship between language learners and their identities and access to valued participation that is socially constructed. The rewards for that investment are based on how competence is valued by

gatekeepers. In the works of Darvin and Norton (2023), the concept of investment is linked to identity, capital and ideology while the concept of motivation is understood as an individual orientation. Merchandisers' stake is participation with buyers, and the organisation gives them that participation, which can also act as a gatekeeping system for their advancement. The issue of learner motivation in the context of tertiary level English in Bangladesh also suggests that it is not possible to limit learners' involvement in English to individual motivation. It is influenced by the structures of instruction and the opportunities for participation that they provide (Ullah & Fatema, 2013).

The process of professional adaptation is set forth in Ibarra's (1999) account, rather than just the end result. New to roles, professionals watch role models and experiment with provisional selves. They reflect these on internal and external standards and feedback and slowly develop a more stable professional identity. That involves a range of activities from coming up with ideas for senior staff to interacting with buyers on your own, in merchandising.

Neither model provides detail of how communicative performance serves as the basis for recognition of technical expertise within a specific occupational structure. The expertise needed in merchandising – be it production capacity, materials, costing or compliance – is all exercised backstage until it is made known to buyers and managers. Other frontline careers have been associated with the link between English and job mobility (Gallagher, 2024). The relationship between language performance and occupational recognition is still somewhat vague, however. For ESP that gap is important. When communicative performance is the determinant of recognition of expertise, occupational English is more than just the means to an end. It extends itself beyond who is responsible for what, and who gets rewarded for it. The question was approached by way of induction.

Multilingual Repertoires in Workplace Communication

García and Li (2014) recast multilingual communication as one integrated linguistic repertoire in use, not as movement between bounded languages. Speakers, on this view, mesh whatever resources serve their communicative ends (Canagarajah, 2013). Workplace research has shown such practices to be functional, for instance among Polish truck drivers in the Netherlands (Dijkstra et al., 2021). Battilani (2022) framed workplace translanguaging as co-learning and participatory investment. In Kazakhstani business, English, Russian and Kazakh served distinct, audience-sensitive functions (Aimoldina & Akynova, 2025). Bangla–English mixing is routine in educated communication within Bangladesh (Datta, 2025).

Much translanguaging scholarship rests on observed interaction. Interview data offer something else: access to participants' metalinguistic accounts of their language choices. The study therefore draws on the translanguaging literature to frame *reported multilingual repertoire use*, not to document translanguaging in situ. For ESP these

accounts still matter; they reveal how practitioners themselves sort audiences, channels and occasions. Any occupationally relevant course would need to respect those distinctions.

The Present Study

In this context, the study aims to understand the communicative events that are experienced by merchandisers, the impact of performance in English on credibility and progress, as well as the reporting of mobilising multilingual resources for different audiences. It is located within ESP, not next to ESP. It does not replace needs analysis with an identity study; it assumes the perspective of the practitioner in the target situation. Target communicative events can then be double bound with task completion, professional assessment and multilingual coordination. That point of view is relevant because how EOP courses select, sequence and assess the occupational tasks is of importance. It is also relevant to the extent to which they train practitioners to face the challenges of all their communication or just the English medium surface.

Methodology

Research Design and Evidential Scope

The study was qualitative and interpretive in nature. It is appropriate to the question of meaning and for professional self-understanding rather than for the measurement of discrete skills (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Semi-structured interviews (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009) and a focus group discussion (FGD) were the data sources and reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019, 2021) was used for data analysis. The data are retrospective accounts by the participants from which English translation has been made as required. They demonstrate communicative events as experienced, interpreted and reported by merchandisers, as well as describing how they choose language. They offer no direct evidence of the linguistic form of workplace interaction; nor do they show how buyers and managers actually judge merchandisers.

Setting and Participants

Purposive sampling and maximum variation sampling method were used to select the participants from the garment factories and buying houses of Chattogram. Access was provided by professional contacts and organisational gatekeepers. That was their only information and they weren't informed about the identity of that who/what was speaking. The sample was aimed at variety of professional background, organizational setting and seniority. Directly customer-facing experience for at least a year was required, not a string of early career experiences.

Twelve merchandisers participated, each an individual, eight of whom participated in individual interviews and four in the FGD (Table 1). The interviews enabled the

participants to reflect on sensitive aspects like anxiety, credibility and career advancement, whereas the FGD revealed common norms and disagreements. Sample adequacy was not assessed for saturation, as this is not aligned with reflexive thematic analysis as Braun and Clarke (2021) consider it to be poorly aligned with interpretive analysis. The narrow occupational focus, the specificity of participants' buyer-facing experience and the richness of their accounts were the yardsticks. Table 2 summarises the sampling frame. The Chattogram is a shop with a very small and close-knit merchandising team. Individual demographic and organisational information is thus hidden as it could be used to identify participants to employers or buyers.

Table 1: Data sources

Data source	Participants (n)	Duration	Purpose
Semi-structured individual interviews	8	approx. 45–60 min each	Detailed accounts of buyer communication, professional trajectory and reported language use with different workplace audiences
Focus group discussion	4	approx. 30–40 min	Comparison, within the group, of communicative experiences and language norms at work

Table 2: Sampling frame and participant characteristics (N = 12)

Characteristic	Description
Total sample	12 merchandisers (8 interview participants; 4 focus-group participants; distinct individuals)
Organisational settings	Garment factories and buying houses in Chattogram, Bangladesh
Dimensions of variation sought	Seniority (junior to senior merchandisers), organisational type, gender, and professional background
Eligibility	At least one year of continuous, direct buyer-facing responsibility; exclusively internal-facing roles excluded
Data collection period	February 2026

Note. Individual-level characteristics are withheld because, in a small occupational community, they could permit deductive identification.

Data Collection

Interviews took place in February 2026, face to face or by video call as each participant preferred, and lasted about 45–60 minutes. The guide was flexible and matched

to the research questions. It covered recent buyer interactions by email, in meetings and on video calls; professional trajectory, confidence and recognition; and language use in buyer-facing, production-facing and peer communication. Participants narrated specific recent episodes instead of generalising: a delay notification, say, or an unexpected buyer question. The FGD was held the same month and ran about 30–40 minutes. It invited participants to compare strategies and to respond to one another's views of professional English and of everyday multilingual coordination. It was treated as a related but separate dataset and was not used to establish consensus. In both formats, participants could speak Bangla, English or a mixture of the two.

Transcription and Translation

All sessions were audio taped with permission. They were verbatim transcribed by a research assistant, who is fluent in both Bangla and English, and was cross checked with industry terminology and participants' use of the language. These bilingual transcripts were used for analysis. If a register or stance were anticipated to be lost in the translation, the original was retained and a gloss in English provided. Each published quotation was checked by a bilingual reviewer for accuracy with reference to the transcript. With discrepancies, discussion was used to resolve them, and the audio was deemed authoritative with the revisions being recorded in a translation audit trail (Squires, 2009). The multilingual nature of the original talk is lost in the English translation in Section 4, as is inevitable. Here's another one to treat Theme Three as reported practice.

Data Analysis

Analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2019, 2021) reflexive thematic analysis, which makes the researcher's interpretive engagement its main analytic resource. The six recursive phases run from familiarisation and systematic coding, through theme generation and review against coded extracts and the full dataset, to defining and naming themes and analytic writing. Familiarisation involved repeated listening alongside the bilingual transcripts, and memos from this phase were kept in the audit trail so that later interpretive decisions could be traced. Coding captured semantic content (for example, difficulty answering unexpected questions) and latent meanings (for example, assumptions about who may speak to buyers). The analysis was sensitised by the concepts of genre and communicative event, investment, professional adaptation and translanguaging. Codes and themes, however, were developed from participants' accounts rather than fitted to predefined categories.

I carried out the coding. No inter-coder agreement statistics or code frequencies were calculated. Such measures presuppose a single correct coding and are inconsistent with reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019, 2021; Woodward, 2020). The

bilingual reviewer's role was confined to verifying translations. Themes were understood as patterns of shared meaning built around a central organising concept. An early candidate theme on "speaking anxiety" was reworked once participants were seen to locate difficulty not in speaking as such but in the temporal conditions of particular events. Out of that rework came the asynchronous–synchronous organisation of Theme One. Codes on credit and buyer access were similarly folded into the concept of visibility. Three themes resulted. They were differentiated communicative demands, English-mediated professional visibility and reported multilingual repertoire management. Quotations carry stable extract codes (EX1–EX17) linked to the translation audit trail. For the anonymity reasons given in Section 3.2, the codes do not indicate role, organisation or data source.

Quality, Reflexivity, and Positionality

I am not an insider of the RMG because I am a Bangladeshi applied linguist with a focus on ESP, assessment and multilingual education. It was a role that afforded him the understanding of the local language ecology, and a bit of insulation from the occupational biases of merchandising. I had no managerial or commercial responsibility in any organisation I was involved in. Reflective journal used for making assumptions, alternative readings and boundary cases. One entry pointed out that risk of reproducing the deficit framing typical of the needs analysis research genre. The heuristic points were Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria. Comparing data from interview and FGD visits gave the credibility to the interviews, and verifying translations gave credibility to the data from FGD visits. Audit trail of analytic decisions, reflexive journaling and contextual description were used to document dependability, confirmability and transferability, respectively. These were considered as interconnected commitments which must be substantively justified (Alam et al., 2025). The designs also have to be revised to meet epistemological requirements for reflexive, multilingual designs (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Ullah et al., 2026).

Ethical Considerations

Before data collection began in February 2026, the study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of GASD. Participants were told about the study's purpose, voluntary participation, recording, confidentiality and withdrawal, and each gave informed consent. Participants, organisations and buyers were anonymised. Recordings and transcripts were kept in encrypted storage accessible only to me and the research assistant. The bilingual reviewer worked from de-identified material, and all three of us were bound by confidentiality undertakings. The data will be securely deleted five years after publication. FGD participants were asked not to disclose session content. No account was shared with any employer, gatekeeper or buyer. Criticism of management or buyers can carry professional consequences in this industry.

Findings

Three interrelated themes were developed from the analysis, and Table 3 summarises them. Each extract below is a verified English rendering of what participants said (Section 3.4).

Theme One: Differentiated communicative demands across asynchronous and synchronous events

Two events mattered most to participants. They were email and synchronous buyer communication, meaning meetings and video calls. What separated them was less the skill each required than the time each allowed for producing language.

> "When I write an email, I have time to think. If there is a mistake, I can catch it before I send. In a meeting, though, the buyer asks and I must answer straight away." (EX1)

Email let merchandisers plan, draft and revise. Terms and figures could be checked, or a colleague asked, before a phrasing was settled. Email rewarded accuracy. Most participants saw themselves as competent writers of routine correspondence. Synchronous interaction squeezed all of that formulation into the instant of response. Participants took care to separate this problem from any shortfall in occupational knowledge.

> "It is not that I don't know the answer. I know what happened in production, but I can't always explain all of it fast enough in English." (EX2)

> "If the buyer suddenly asks something I haven't prepared for, I get nervous. The information is there, but I need a little time to arrange the English." (EX3)

These accounts place the difficulty in turning known content into spoken English against the clock. Technical and commercial vocabulary had to be found on the spot, and an unrehearsed explanation had to be built, all under evaluation. "Arrange the English" neatly names the planning work that email allows and live talk denies. Participants seem to have seen the problem as one of performance, not competence. Knowing what to say was never the issue. They could not always say it at the required speed, and that distinction is unlikely to show up in general proficiency measures. The demand increased when the content was problematic. Delays, quality failures and complaints were mentioned as the most stressful events of all as an explanation for failure should not compromise the confidence of the buyer.

> "That's the pressure we have on us: If we don't get this delay clear we may make the buyer think that the order is not well handled. (EX4)."

The delay notification was a recurring genre of merchandising which thus took a turn with its channel. It could be written and tuned. When rendered in real time, it involved quick decision-making and negotiating new deadlines that never made it in the original texts. When spoken aloud, it needed to be rapidly solved, and fresh deadlines negotiated that would never have been included in the original text. Synchronous events were prepared, but there was awareness of the limitations of preparation.

> "Before the meeting, I make a lot of notes...but sometimes the buyer will ask me about something else...so I have to talk extempore, which is much more difficult." (EX5)

When looking across the dataset, there seemed to be two distinct phenomena of prepared performance and interactional flexibility. Rather unexpected questions were thrown at them to see if a merchandiser could take the buyer's line of questioning and reformulate. They also determined if the merchandiser could continue to look around the floor while researching information and remain calm. Participants also took their performance to the extreme, representing themselves to stand for the institution.

> "What I say to the buyer, I represent my factory, if I can't answer confident, then they may not trust us." (EX6).

When participants spoke of their hesitation, it might not be a personal struggle but an organisational falter. These data do not answer the question of whether or not buyers actually made that inference, but they do reflect the sense of the events: times when linguistic performance and commercial trustworthiness could not be distinguished. This perception held a significant influence on the way merchandisers prepared and perceived in the moment. When the merchandiser was most exposed to the business, his voice was, in effect, the supplier's.

Theme Two: English-Mediated Professional Visibility

Theme Two focuses on the relationship between occupational English and the participants' status. In these narratives, English is not so much a skill as a symptom; it renders other competence(s) visible to those who give responsibility and recognition. There are three aspects that can be distinguished. Access is key, as participants associated independent buyer communication with delegated trust.

> "If you have a good English command, you can talk to the buyer yourself, your manager can then give you more responsibility." (EX7)

Standing was obtained by direct buyer contact as provided by managers who were judged on communicative competence. To get ahead meant moving from the backstage to the frontstage of preparation, as described by the participants.

> "At first, I would only prepare information for my senior now I speak directly to the buyer and feel that I have progressed in my career." (EX8)

When it came to talking with the purchaser, permission to change the nature of the job was more than duties. The story in EX8 is also similar to the movement Ibarra (1999) outlines, in which a provisional professional self is tested out and then integrated with feedback. That seeing was a confirmation by people who interacted with the buyer, the manager's decision to allow direct access was the confirming feedback. The second is recognition and the third is the translation. Technical, but not necessarily correct, answers did not receive professional credit.

> "Sometimes I have an idea, but someone else explains it more in English, and it's the one that the manager or buyer picks up on." (EX9)

EX9 outlines a potential disconnect between generation of expertise and its recognition. When the knowledge of materials, capacity, costing and compliance are in the back seat, the moment of attribution is when you tell a buyer or manager about a solution. Communicative performance filters whose expertise is seen if credit falls on the person who explains best on the topic. The visibility was also relational, as it was about who is seeing the expertise, whether a line manager deciding on future assignments or a buyer in forming a view of the supplier. The third aspect is related to the evaluation of English. For these participants, grammar was not the key to making English "professional.

> "Buyers aren't interested in flawless grammar each and every time, they're interested in grasping the problem and what you're doing to address it." (EX10)

> "To me, professional English is clear and confident English, if I get one or two things wrong but have addressed the customer's need, it doesn't matter." (EX11)

Clarity, confidence and solving the problem were the criteria they appealed to. Being professional was about taking control of the problem and of the interaction, not about being 'nativish' in speaking, but still accurate in writing. All three sides suggest a process, which I am going to call English-mediated professional visibility. It refers to the manner in which technical skills take on meaning and become visible to others in an occupation, and subsequently translated into responsibility, recognition and promotion. I propose as an analytical concept the term "process of the term". I submit the term as an analytic concept

that is grounded in these accounts. It is not a theory that has been established.

Theme Three: Reported Multilingual Repertoire Management

Participants consistently reported English as the expected language of formal buyer communication. Once information moved inside the organisation, however, they described a different linguistic environment.

> "With the buyer I speak English. When I explain the same thing to the production people, though, I normally use Bangla and keep the technical terms in English." (EX12)

EX12 describes mediation inside the organisation, where buyer requirements arrive in English and are re-expressed in Bangla for production teams. English terminology was reportedly kept because buyer specifications and production routines already used it.

> "If I translate every technical word into Bangla, things can get confusing. We keep the English term because everyone in the factory knows it." (EX13)

Different resources, then, did different jobs. English terminology gave precision and continuity with buyer documents; Bangla gave speed and interpersonal clarity. The retained English terms appear, in these accounts, to form a shared occupational lexicon that ties buyer specifications to internal documents and floor-level talk. Swapping them for Bangla would, on this account, have added ambiguity rather than removed it. Participants also showed a clear awareness of register boundaries.

> "We know when formal English is called for. With the buyer, we can't talk the way we do with colleagues." (EX14)

Messaging among colleagues was called the most flexible channel, with English words sitting inside Bangla sentences and Bangla sometimes romanised.

> "On Messenger or WhatsApp we often mix everything — Bangla, English, technical terms. It's faster, and everyone understands." (EX15)

Across the accounts, language choice appeared as selection by audience, channel and urgency. Audiences were buyers, production teams or peers; channels ran from email and meetings to face-to-face briefings and instant messaging. Urgency meant being understood fast when production was at stake. Such metalinguistic accounts show how participants justified their choices, not the precise form of their talk. Even so, they present multilingual coordination as a routine, purposeful part of occupational competence.

Participants said these practices sat uneasily with the English-only orientation of their earlier instruction.

> "In class we were taught to make complete English sentences, but nobody in the factory talks like that all the time. We use whatever language makes the work easier." (EX16)

> "With buyers we need proper English, but inside the factory formal English doesn't always work. We need Bangla if people are to understand quickly." (EX17)

None of this rejects standard English; participants saw it as essential to buyer-facing credibility. What the accounts question is the assumption that English alone makes up occupational communication. They also suggest that the internal, multilingual mediation work of merchandising had gone unseen in their preparation. Themes Two and Three are connected at this point. The English performed before buyers is the visible surface of a chain of communicative work, much of it conducted in Bangla, that remains unseen by those who evaluate the merchandiser.

Table 3: Summary of themes, reported communicative events, and implications for EOP provision

Theme	Key communicative events	Reported demands	Implications for EOP provision
1. Differentiated demands across asynchronous and synchronous events	Buyer email; delay notification; video meetings; unexpected questions	Email: planning, revision, accuracy. Live interaction: real-time retrieval, unrehearsed explanation, flexibility, composure	Organise provision by event and temporal condition; rehearse unpredictable, time-pressured interaction
2. English-mediated professional visibility	Direct buyer contact; explaining solutions to buyers and managers	Making expertise recognisable; clarity and confidence valued over native-like accuracy	Develop capacity to explain technical work; stage progression to autonomous buyer contact
3. Reported multilingual repertoire management	Internal production briefings; peer messaging; formal buyer communication	Audience-, channel-, and urgency-sensitive choice among English, Bangla, and mixed resources	Include bilingual mediation tasks; make register and channel choice explicit

Discussion

The findings are consistent with the needs-analysis literature (Islam & Ahmad, 2025; Li So-mui & Mead, 2000; Roshid & Kankaanranta, 2025) but extend it in three directions (Sections 5.1–5.3). Each rests on participants' accounts rather than observed interaction (Section 3.1).

From Skill Categories to Event Conditions (RQ1)

Previous studies report speaking as a persistent difficulty for merchandisers (Islam & Ahmad, 2025). Participants in this study described difficulty arising under particular event conditions, namely synchronous interaction, unpredictability and commercially consequential content. Needs analyses organised by skill may therefore obscure what practitioners find most consequential, that is, the temporal and interactional conditions under which language must be produced. Classifying target events by channel, planning time, predictability and stakes would give course designers a more precise basis for sequencing tasks. The point converges with Evans's (2010) finding that language use in Hong Kong workplaces divided along channel lines. The present data suggest that channel also shapes the experienced difficulty of communicating in English, not only the choice of language.

The findings also extend Bhatia's (2004) point that professional genres are inseparable from institutional practice. In a buyer-driven chain (Gereffi, 1994), the delay notification and the buyer meeting are also evaluative occasions, at which practitioners perceive supplier reliability being read off the merchandiser's performance. Whether or not buyers make such inferences, the perception shaped preparation, confidence and the distribution of speaking roles. It is therefore a legitimate object of EOP analysis.

English-Mediated Professional Visibility (RQ2)

The study's principal conceptual contribution is English-mediated professional visibility. Norton's (2013) investment and Ibarra's (1999) provisional selves explain why English-mediated participation is valued and how practitioners grow into autonomous roles. What the data add is a specific account of how, in this occupational structure, communicative performance mediates the recognition of expertise. The concept differs from investment in its locus. Investment describes the learner's socially shaped commitment to a language, whereas visibility describes an organisational process of recognition that operates on practitioners whatever their investment. It works through the allocation of communicative events and the attribution of credit within them.

There are three connected parts to the mechanism. Much merchandising skill takes place behind the scenes and is only needed when it is shared. The events in which expertise

is communicated are allocated based on perceived English competence (EX7, EX8), which means that access to the buyer is a type of delegated trust. Credit may be given to the one who explains the solution, not to the one who developed the solution (EX9). These combine to indicate a possible vicious circle: the more visible they are and the more they practice, the more the public trusts them as communicatively competent, which translates into better buyer access and, in turn, more practice, visibility, and responsibility. Weaker speakers of English may remain in the backstage, where their expertise is less obvious. The supervised stage provides little opportunity for Ibarra's (1999) idea of a provisional professional self to be challenged by the audience that matters most.

This mechanism aligns with findings that a business employer in Bangladesh uses fluency and confidence as proxies for competency (Alam et al., 2023). The participants showed a preference for clarity and problem-solving over accuracy (EX10, EX11), reflecting the task-focused norm of Business English as a Lingua Franca as outlined by Kankaanranta and Louhiala-Salminen (2010) and Roshid and Kankaanranta (2025). This is on the basis of which evidence that visibility follows the effectiveness of the occupation, rather than the native-speaker conformity. This presents equity issues. Seniority, gender and education may also be involved in the allocation if perceptions of English competence determine access to the buyer. These data are not able to investigate such factors although they are relevant in a sector that is characterized by linguistic and social hierarchies (Hamid, 2020; Ullah, in press).

Multilingual Mediation as Occupational Work (RQ3)

Participants' accounts of language choice sensitive to audience, channel and urgency are consistent with repertoire-based accounts of multilingual communication (Canagarajah, 2013; García & Li, 2014) and with workplace studies in which different resources serve distinct functions (Aimoldina & Akynova, 2025; Battilani, 2022; Dijkstra et al., 2021; Evans, 2010). The distinctive ESP implication concerns the scope of the target situation. Merchandisers' work does not end at the buyer interface. Requirements received in English must be re-expressed in Bangla for production teams, with English terminology retained (EX12, EX13). Bilingual mediation of this kind is a recurrent occupational task. Yet English-only needs analyses miss it, as, by participants' accounts, did their earlier instruction (EX16, EX17). The finding thereby extends a long-noted divergence between classroom prescription and communicative practice in Bangladeshi ELT (Ullah, 2015). Nor is the work mere translation. Participants described choosing what production teams needed to know, which terms to keep to anchor instructions to buyer documents, and what register the urgency of the moment required.

Implications for Needs Analysis In EOP

The findings point to ways of broadening EOP needs analysis without giving up its curricular purpose. Beyond the triangulation of sources already recommended (Flowerdew, 2013), instruments could take in three further dimensions. Event conditions come first, meaning the planning time, predictability, audience and stakes of each event. Recognition is second. It asks who performs which events, how access is allocated and how performance bears on advancement, and it links target-situation analysis to Belcher's (2006) concern with imagined futures. The third, mediation, is the internal relay of information across languages, which English-only instruments consistently underrepresent. None of these pushes aside the identification of target genres and skills. They place genres and skills within the professional practice that gives them their stakes. To move beyond needs analysis, in this sense, is to ask what a needs analysis attentive to situated practice must include.

Pedagogical Implications

What follows are evidence-informed proposals, and each still needs to be evaluated.

First, communicative events may be planned into the provision, for example, buyer e-mails, delay e-mails, video meetings, and unexpected questions. Tasks can be changed from planned to unplanned conditions as participants find the change from prepared to spontaneous speech difficult. A learner could write down a delay notification, play a recorded version of the conversation and respond to spontaneous questions from the trainer who is pretending to be the buyer. These simulations can also be used to offer training in interactional strategies – seeking clarification, taking the floor to collect information, summarising commitments, and deferring detail with a believable follow-up.

Secondly, there may be provision for different stages of career. If you're a junior merchandiser who is transitioning from backstage to buyer, it can be beneficial to observe your senior colleagues in action with buyers. They might then move into supervised, less threatening exchanges, following Ibarra's (1999) gradual transition. For experienced merchandisers, it might be more beneficial to work on negotiating and handling complaints.

Third, the findings on visibility call for the development of the skills of building practitioners in articulating and accounting for their technical work. Organisations too may be encouraged to think about the way in which to credit backstage expertise. This ability is reflective of the same kind of reasoned and explanatory use of English that writing education aims to produce in low-proficiency undergraduates from Bangladesh (Ullah et al., 2022). Evaluation in this kind of provision might also be based on what participants felt to be important – clarity, problem solving, interactional control – rather than just on

grammar.

Fourth, provision can be repertoire-aware. Bilingual mediation tasks, such as relaying a buyer's revised specification to a production team, could become legitimate EOP objectives. Register and channel choice could also be made explicit. Bilingual rehearsal is a plausible design option, in which learners plan a response in Bangla and English before performing it in English under timed conditions. Simatupang and Supri (2024) reported gains from combining translanguaging pedagogy with speaking technology among Indonesian hospitality staff. Comparable benefits in RMG training, however, remain to be tested.

Finally, the preference for workplace-embedded provision reported by Islam and Ahmad (2025) suggests that factory-or cluster-level delivery may be more feasible than generic courses. Such delivery could potentially take blended forms, like those reported for co-taught ESP courses in Bangladesh (Rabbi et al., 2026). Any blended design would nonetheless have to reckon with the access and infrastructure constraints documented for online professional development in Bangladesh (Ullah, 2023b). Authentic workplace texts, such as anonymised buyer emails and delay notifications, would strengthen such provision. They would need the consent of the organisations concerned, and commercially sensitive details would have to be removed.

Limitations and Future Research

The data are retrospective, self-reported accounts shaped by memory, self-presentation and the research encounter. They illuminate experience and interpretation but do not capture workplace interaction, buyers' or managers' evaluations, or the linguistic form of reported multilingual practice. Translation obscures that form further. Twelve merchandisers from one city, including a single focus group, support analytic rather than statistical generalisation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Buyers, managers and production staff were not included. Gender and organisational type informed sampling but were not developed analytically. My outsider position may also have limited access to tacit technical meanings. What participants said about buyer evaluation and about colleagues' visibility is, again, their own perception, and it may be coloured by occupational narratives that circulate at work. Future research could analyse anonymised buyer emails, delay notifications and recorded meetings or simulations (Bhatia, 2004; Swales, 1990). It could include buyers and managers to test whether visibility operates as participants perceived. Longitudinal studies could follow how buyer access is allocated over time, and whether gender or education patterns that allocation.

Conclusion

Within the scope of its interview and focus-group data, this study makes three

contributions to ESP/EOP. It shows that the asynchronous–synchronous distinction organises how RMG merchandisers experience occupational demands. It proposes English-mediated professional visibility as a concept for how communicative performance conditions whether expertise is recognised and rewarded. And it shows practitioners describing occupational communication as multilingual mediation. In that mediation, formal English at the buyer interface depends on purposeful use of Bangla, English and mixed resources inside the organisation. Needs analysis remains indispensable for identifying what practitioners must do in English. Understanding what is at stake in merchandisers' target events, though, gives a stronger basis for preparing them for Bangladesh's buyer-driven garment industry. The same questions, about event conditions, recognition and mediation, seem worth asking in other multilingual occupations where English is the language of external accountability and local languages carry the internal work.

Declaration of Generative AI And AI-Assisted Technologies in the Manuscript Preparation Process

During the preparation of this work the author used Grammarly to support structural revision and language editing. After using this tool, the author reviewed and edited the content as needed and takes full responsibility for the content of the published article.

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