

The Construction of Oral Problems in an EFL Context:

An Innovative Approach

Alireza Jamshidnejad¹

Abstract: How are oral problems constructed in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) communication? Oral communication problems can be major challenges to effective foreign language learning and communication. This paper investigates the nature of oral problems in foreign language learning and communication in order to provide a means of being more familiar with the complexities of problem-construction in an EFL context. Using theories of interpersonal communication, I introduce a novel approach for rethinking the issue of language use and context with foreign language learners. Adopting a qualitative research approach, I collected data from a series of interviews with a group of language teachers and Persian learners of English Literature and Translation. Analysing interview data allowed me to capture the viewpoints of participants with respect to how they perceived their problems in L2 oral communication. The findings challenge stereotypes about lack of language knowledge always being responsible for oral problem in L2 communication. I conclude that oral problems are also mediated by participants' construction of self, others and by the context of L2 communication.

Keywords: Oral communication problems; Learners' perception; Persian English-Speakers; Social construction; EFL Context

1. INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, the majority of English users can be found in countries where the language is employed as a foreign or second language. Effective use of English as a second language (ESL) or foreign language (EFL) in oral communication is, without a doubt, one of the most common, but also highly complex activities people need to learn for their interpersonal communication. For most people, learning how to speak in a second language (L2) is seen to be much more important than reading and writing (Ya-ni, 2007).

¹ Department of English and Language Studies Canterbury Christ Church University, Canterbury, CT11QU, Kent, Bio-data: Alireza Jamshidnejad, born in 1970 in Iran, holding an MA in Applied Linguistics for Language Teaching from University of Southampton, recently completed his PhD in Applied Linguistics at University of Kent at Canterbury, UK. His main research interests are second/foreign language (L2) learning and communication, problems of orality and language strategies, interactional discourse analysis, pragmatics, sociolinguistics, and intercultural communication. England Aj104@canterbury.ac.uk. jamshidnejad@yahoo.com.

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Achieving proficiency in oral communication (i.e. speaking) is the main dream and the main motivation which a large percentage of learners bring to language classes (Richards & Renandya, 2002). Moreover, students of second/foreign language education programs are considered successful if they can communicate effectively in the language (Riggenback & Lazaraton, 1991). However, foreign language learners, despite spending years developing their semantic and syntactic competences, have all probably, at some point, experience the frustrating feeling of not being able to participate effectively in L2 oral communication (Hedge, 2004).

Although most EFL learners and perhaps some of the teachers believe that oral communication problems can be solved through "more practice" in vocabulary and structure, I believe this is a simplified approach to such a complex and multi dimensional phenomenon. To develop the knowledge to deal with oral communication problems in an EFL context, researchers first need to know the real nature of those problems and the circumstances in which 'problems' are constructed. Unlike the communication among 'native/non-native' speakers (NS/NNS), 'non-native/non native' (NNS/NNS) speakers and their problems in L2 oral communication has up to now received little attention from language researchers. Reviewing briefly the process of interpersonal communication and problem-construction in EFL communication, this paper hopes to go deeper than current knowledge which is mostly limited to lexical problems of communication between NS/NNS.

2. THE MAIN SOURCES OF PROBLEMS IN L2 COMMUNICATION

Language use and communication are pervasively and even naturally flawed, partial, and problematic (Coupland *et al.* 1991: 3). In recent years, problems in communication have attracted more attention of some of communication scholars who studied problems with two approaches: the linguistic approach and the interactional (interpersonal) approach (House, 2003: 23). The linguistic approach includes language-based problems, in which the linguistic differences between languages cause interruption of the referential meaning of individual utterances. Linguistic problems can occur when there is a problem in the speakers' intention, willingness and ability to cognise and encode, or in the hearers' perception and decoding, essentially involving unsuccessful mappings of intention and linguistic form (Dua, 1990).

Inter-personal, or interactional sources of problems, on the other hand, refers to the social factors which are established interpersonally and cannot be attributed to either participant in communication. For example, sociocultural differences can cause difficulties in conversational inferences and increase the chance of misinterpretation for communicators, even though both participants share a referential meaning.

This paper aims to bring together current isolated approaches and provide a comprehensive overview of the sources of oral problems in foreign language learning and communication. Using a systematic approach, this paper employs the general theory of interpersonal communication to understand the complexities of problem-construction in EFL oral communication. In this study, communication is defined as a social systematic process of creating symbolic meaning and responding between communicators, constructed in a specific context (Adler & Rodman, 2003). For successful communication the message and meaning intended by the communicator should be correctly received and interpreted by the listener. Any shortage and interruption in any of three components of communication (communicators, meaning creation, and context) can result in 'unsuccessful communication'. Ogili (2005: 2) supports this idea but classifies the main sources of unsuccessful communication as the 'sender and receiver' instead of 'communicators', the 'message to be sent' and 'the channel for carrying the message' instead of 'symbolic meaning creation and responding'. This will be completed in this paper by adding 'context' as the third main source of misunderstanding.

Therefore, the main sources of problem can be classified into the following groups:

- *Communicator based problems*
- *Meaning creating problems*
- *Contextual problems*

In this study, I investigate how participants' oral problems might be mediated by their construction of self, others and by the context of L2 communication.

3. THE STUDY

Language users' expectations toward different aspects of L2 communication (self, others, meaning creation and context) is one of the important factors explaining the construction of participants' oral performance in foreign or second language setting (Tannen, 1993: 16; Inoi & Dosch, 2005: 54). Furthermore, participants' perspectives have been seen as a rich source of data (Kanno, 2003) and Mackey (2002) has suggested that 'researchers working in the area of input and interaction could benefit from considering learners' perspectives' (393).

However, methodologically, previous studies of oral communication place greater emphasis on the lexical side of communication problems, and pay little or no attention to the social-interactional context (intercultural context, or interpersonal context, or communication context) of utterances (Dobao & Martinez, 2007). I believe this somehow narrow approach is fostered by the dominance of quantitative research methodologies in previous studies fosters a narrow approach.

I chose a qualitative approach as my research methodology to investigate the construction of oral problems in an EFL context and from the perspective of all of those involved in its construction (Richards, 2003: 10). To do that, I found the constructivism principles (opportunism, reflexivity, deep description) in the 'postmodern qualitative approach' (Holliday, 2007: 19) helpful for making me aware of interactional effects of social context on the problems in L2 oral communication.

3.1 Participants

To prevent continuous interruptions in the process of communication caused by a low level of language proficiency, I chose university students from an English language department, who needed to have at least an upper- intermediate level of English to pass the entrance exam and enter the university. Furthermore, these students had studied English for at least three years at their universities and had passed several courses in grammar, reading, conversation and writing to an advanced level. So it was assumed that they had enough proficiency in L2 oral communication to take part in communicative events without a lot of hesitation.

I chose 12 Persian undergraduate students of English Literature and Translation and one postgraduate student in TEFL, both male and female, aged 20-24, who were interested in my study when I called and invited them to take part in my research. To gain familiarity with another party's opinion of problems in L2 oral communication, I also interviewed a group of four language teachers.

All participation was voluntary. I guaranteed their anonymity although they gave me permission to use their real names in my research report.

3.2 Data collection and analysis

I employed the interview as the source of data collection within an interpretive framework of analysis partly constructed by the current literature. I follow, in Eisner's (1991) words, an interpretative (tries to explain why), and expressive (presents the real voice rather than depersonalized language) perspective, to interpret the participants' perception of their problems, based on the possible social and individual variables, constructing problematic situations in L2 oral communication.

The interview was used on two groups of participants: language learners and teachers. All the interviews were about participants' experience of oral problems and the factors are influential in constructing those problems. However, the teachers' interviews included their experience of students' problems in L2 communication, as well. All interviews (except one) were carried out in English. As language teachers are busy people, finding free time for conducting interviews was very difficult. So, I decided to do a

semi-structured interview on these topics to collect the maximum information in the minimum of time. All interviews were audio- recorded.

3.3 The Coding Scheme for Interview Data Analysis

The interviews were analysed based on thematic view. Thematic Analysis is an approach to dealing with data that involves analyzing and, in Holliday's (2007: 93) words, organizing the data. The main step in thematic analysis is coding and arranging the data under emerging themes through the dialogue between data and a researcher (ibid: 94). In my analysis of the interviews, the themes were not pre-established but instead arose through a long-term series of intensive dialogues with the interview data. I read and read the interviews' transcripts for several times and classified their content based on my interpretation of them into different themes. The first phase of the analysis showed that the data could be understood thematically. Some themes were explicitly mentioned in the interviews, for example 'face concern', and in such cases it was very easy to identify and label the themes. However, other themes were interpreted from the content of the interview. This type of labelling occurred if participants themselves did not use a specific metaphor but they expressed a consistent set of characteristics of oral performance that pointed toward a particular theme.

4. COMMUNICATORS' BASED PROBLEMS

4.1 L2 Users' Perception of the Ideal L2 Speaker

Learning and using language in a foreign context is strongly connected to the learner's constructions of self (Arnold, 2000). I found that '*being fluent in L2 oral communication*' is one of the participants' wishes and expectations, a factor in constructing their ideal-self as L2 users. The following interview extracts describe how speaking fluently in a target language is an expectation, given a high priority by people from inside and outside the language educational setting.

Arabi, one of the English teachers in a language institute, set 'fluency in L2 speaking' as one of his primary aims at the beginning of his professional training as an English teacher:

Arabi: When I started my study in teacher training college, my main aim was to be fluent English speaker, because I believe that I can learn English Grammar in one month (Teacher interview, 11/09/2008)

Not only the practitioners in language education, but also the people out of the educational setting expect language learners to be fluent in L2 speaking. Amin, one of the graduate students pointed at 'other people' giving the priority to fluency in L2 speaking, rather than proficiency in the other skills, like reading and writing:

Amin: Speaking is something else, people expect you to be fluent in speaking rather than reading and writing (Interview, 31/08/2008).

Then she illustrated this point by referring to *employers* in the teaching job market who expect applicants for language teaching jobs to be fluent in L2 speaking rather than being proficient in the other skills:

Amin: In learning English you should be able to speak English fluently, no one looking for your knowledge in linguistics, but job market is looking for people with fluent accent in speaking. So, I found my language learning in university completely useless which couldn't help me to be fluent (Interview, 31/08/2008).

As can be seen, being a fluent speaker with a 'fluent accent' in the target language has been seen by Amin as an essential requirement for a language user in order to be employed as an English teacher. It seems that the participants construct their ideal self and their expectations based on some high standards of linguistics performance.

Speaking grammatically perfectly was the other desire constructing participants' self-expectation as L2 speaker. Najar identified pronunciation, intonation and idioms as important standards of his ideal self as L2 speaker:

Najar: In my opinion pronunciation and intonation are fundamentals in language learning ... I think learning idioms in English are important as well (Interview, 4/08/2008).

Jafri, also believed in fast speaking, structure and then accent as three most important factors L2 speakers need to have in their oral communication:

Jafri: pronunciation and fast speaking are very important in L2 oral communication... Structure in speaking is more important than accent, because when the structure is great, speaker normally wouldn't care about accent very much. Then accent is important (interview, 18/08/2008).

In Jarfi's opinion, structure is much more important than accent. In another interview, I asked participants to describe their expectations of good L2 speaker. I interpreted all the above characteristics as high accuracy qualities with which the participants construct their image of an ideal L2 speaker in communication. It is therefore reasonable to assume that these qualities will feature as part of the participant's own self-image. L2 users who choose 'to be perfect' as their image of 'ideal speaker' would like 'to speak flawlessly, with no grammatical or pronunciation errors, and as easily as a native speaker', thus constructing the ideal conditions for language problems and also anxiety in L2 communication, a result which is supported by Gregersen and Horwitz (2004: 563). This proficiency in spoken L2 was expected by 'others' from inside and the outside the language learning settings.

4.2 Perception of Other Interlocutors in L2 Communication

For comprehensive understanding of L2 communication, researchers (i.e. Wagner & Firth, 1997, Anderson, 1998, Dobao & Martínez, 2007) paid attention to the role of both participants in interaction, or in Yule and Tarone's (1991: 167) words 'both sides of the page'. Participants' perceptions of their interlocutors significantly can influence their pattern of interactional moves in L2 communication (Morris & Tarone, 2003: 325; Sato, 2007: 201). In the extracts below, I describe participants' perception of the interlocutors' role in interaction.

The presence of an interlocutor from an opposite gender in an L2 communication might provoke the speakers to promote *the level of accuracy* of their speech probably in order to demonstrate a higher level of proficiency in L2 oral communication. One of the teachers confirms the effect of others on the speaker performance:

Arabi: Embarrassment occurred in class particularly in mixed class where girls embarrass because of errors in front of boys and vice versa (Teacher Interview, 11/09/2008).

Embarrassment caused by making errors in front of an interlocutor of the opposite gender pushes the speaker to think about the accuracy level of his speech.

In addition to gender, the interlocutor's status as a native / non-native or as an expert /non-expert seems to have an impact on the participants' performance in L2 communication. In the following extract, Amin predicts that speaking with a native speaker will be much more difficult than speaking with a non-native speaker:

Amin: I think if the partner is a Native, it's very important that we try to look at him or her if he or she has understood our message or not, but if it's like us, Iranian speakers, I think we do not have so much problem because our level of speaking, our culture and our way of speaking is similar so there is no so much problem, I think (Interview, 6/09/2008).

In Amin's perception, the native interlocutor's comprehension is much more important to her than a non-native one. She claimed that she might have more problems for speaking with a native speaker than a non-native one.

Amin and Moazed support each others' opinion about being difficult to speak in front of the people with a higher status in the target language:

Amin: I think it depends on situation, when I speak with my teacher it's very bad that I cannot convey me meaning, mostly because of forgetting vocabulary or when they are marking me... when I'm speaking as a teacher with my students, I will change the level of vocabulary and structure

Me: what about you Moazed?

Moazed: about someone higher position?

Me: yes,

Moazed: I feel very bad when I wanted to say but I can't, it doesn't matter who it is there, I may not feel as bad as if I'm in my viva process

Kabiri: yes, that's terrible

Moazed: yes, it's terrible (Interview, 6/09/2008).

It seems the presence of an expert in the target language, particularly when they are or may be evaluating the participants' oral skill, has an influential effect on their performance and may cause or increase problems while they are communicating in L2.

However, in Kabiri's opinion, problems in L2 communication can also be caused by the speakers themselves. Kabiri believes speakers' over-thinking about the interlocutors' comprehension, regardless their language proficiency level, may cause anxiety or stress in L2 oral communication. He pointed to 'over thinking' when I asked about the role of partner in Iranian L2 oral communication:

Kabiri: I think it's very important to think about audience, but the problem is that most of my friends over-think about this and they are very worried about audiences ... The speakers spend much time and energy on it and it affects their quality of speech. I think they do it much more than what is necessary to think about partners' need, facial expression and all signals... As it makes me nervous and anxious, I try not to do it consciously. I try to avoid it (Interview, 06/09/2008).

He identifies the importance of interlocutors in communication but he finds it worries him and makes him anxious when he wants to satisfy his audience in an L2 interaction. He thinks other EFL speakers spend much of their time adjusting their speech to their partners' needs. In general, he believes speakers' over-thinking about their audience's comprehension makes them nervous and anxious while communicating. Thus, he tries to stop thinking a lot about his partner in order to avoid being anxious and nervous.

Hamid explains the unique strategy he uses to deal with the anxious feeling of speaking in front of the others in L2 communication:

Hamid: my only problem in speaking is stress and lot of pressure although I am a cool person.

I try to control my emotion

Me: how?

Hamid: I look for some friendly faces among audiences, for example my classmates, and try to look at them rather than teacher, this makes me comfortable (Interview, 09/08/2008).

It seems that Hamid is concerned about the stress of speaking in front the others in L2 communication. So he looks for a friendly face among his audiences to feel calm while talking about the topic in the class. This extract supports the importance of perceiving the environment as friendly in order to decrease the anxiety of speaking in front of the other interlocutors so that meaning transfer can be facilitated.

To sum up, L2 communication is perceived as an 'essentially social event'. The interlocutors' characteristics such as known or unknown to each other, historical background of their relationship, gender, status, and their proficiency level in a target language, are all perceived as influential on their performance in L2 communication. Participants claim that they adjust the accuracy level of language used in L2 communication based on their perception of interlocutors' level of L2 proficiency, gender and social status in communication. Over-thinking about interlocutor's comprehension and keeping face in front of the more proficient interlocutors with higher social distance (e.g. teachers) in L2 interaction is seen as stressful and

as eliciting anxious behaviour in L2 communication. Therefore, to minimize their anxiety and frustration, participants try to construct a cooperative and friendly environment in L2 interaction.

4.3 Face Concern: The Fear of Speaking in Front of the Others

Interview analysis shows that the participants are aware of and even over-concerned about the interlocutors' evaluation of their performance in L2 communication. It seems participants possess a basic concern for their 'face' as well as their interlocutors' face behind their interactional efforts. Face according to Goffman (1967: 5) is the public self-image a person effectively claims for him/herself.

Arabi, one of the teachers, argued that language learners' fear of losing face which consists of their over-concern with others' evaluation of them and others' language proficiency level, may in fact discourage learners from speaking in L2:

Arabi: Over thinking about their partners' ability of speaking and fear of losing face in front of that partner caused the speaker stop speaking. They always think their partner knows more than them and can speak better, and they think: 'if I mistake my partners might think badly about me' (Teacher's interview, 11/09/2008).

Arabi describes L2 speakers as over-concerned about their own mistakes and over-valuation of their partners' proficiency in L2. Thinking about making mistakes in front of the others, particularly if the speaker plays the role of proficient language user, can intensify the risk of losing face.

The following extract is a part of interview with one of the participants who is an English teacher in a language institute. In his opinion, losing face can cause 'pressure' and can interrupt his performance, and on the other hand, might promote the accuracy level of his speaking, particularly in front of the students:

Karb: being perfect speaker itself is one sources of the pressure in L2 speaking, for example, when I think that, as a teacher, I am not supposed to speak 'ungrammatically', especially in front of my students, I feel pressure, because students will laugh at you and they do not trust more on you as a perfect teacher (Interview, 23/08/2008).

Karb identifies the pressure which arises when speaking in the role of an L2 proficient teacher in front of student audiences who expect to hear perfect L2 utterances. This is a factor which imposes pressure on teachers to promote the accuracy level of their speaking in L2 classes. In essence, speaker position as an L2 expert might push participants to promote the accuracy level of their speaking.

Another teacher confirmed that he has to display the perfect form of the target language in his class:

Arabi: If I teach English in class where one of my student speak more fluent than me, I should leave that class (Teacher Interview, 11/09/2008).

This teacher believes that as a teacher he has to be able to know and demonstrate the perfect form of the target language, even better than all of his students. The position of a teacher as an L2 expert puts him under pressure and even pushes him to leave the class if he cannot play the role of an expert appropriately.

In answer to my question about the reason of not using request for help by Iranian English speakers, Arabi refers to the students' fear of losing face by displaying the low level of proficiency in front of the other classmates:

Arabi: I think in 90% situation, speakers do not want to show their level of English proficiency is lower than their partners by asking for help (Teacher's interview, 11/09/2008).

Arabi confirms that the *speakers' fear of displaying lower level of proficiency than their partners* is the main factor of preventing people from asking for help.

The following interview extract from Zafari, another language teacher, also confirms that the fear of being evaluated as a low level L2 speaker by interlocutors is a cause for not using the target language in teacher-teacher interactions out of the class situation:

Zafari: Well with my colleague I haven't been in that situation, because we always speak Farsi with our colleagues, we don't want to show that 'aha I'm not a good speaker', we don't want to show our weakness in English ... last year we had so many co-worker used lot of English slangs, slangs not even expression or something beautiful, ... I can't remember any of them but it was fully slang, and they were kidding when they see our speaking... we aren't using slangs or we aren't teaching them to our students, they would say us: 'what kind of speaking do you have, how you are teaching the high level of English, you don't know anything', and we just joking with them saying: no problem we are ... we don't know anything in English and something like that, I think in Iran everybody who can speak English trying to show off funny (Teacher Interview, 12/08/2008).

Zafari describes her experience of L2 talking with a group of colleagues in a language institute. A group of teachers challenged her and the other teachers, suggesting they were disqualified teachers because they could not employ slang in their L2 speaking. Those who were criticized decided not to speak English with their critics in order to save face and probably their jobs as well. In fact, the use of slang and other special expressions was seen as a mark of a higher level of proficiency and the skills and abilities of teachers who could not employ those expressions were directly challenged. I interpret this scenario to indicate that being evaluated by some interlocutors in terms of using special forms, such as slang and idioms, in speaking may threaten the other communicators' faces or felt sense of proficiency and that this might end with L2 conversation stopping or switching to L1.

In another interview, one of the participants talks about her experience of stopping speaking in English because of her classmates' negative feedback. Jafri explains how the presence of interlocutors who discourage others from speaking may prevent speakers from using L2 language in communication:

Jafri: being shy, this the reason for most people who stop speaking... that was the reason they didn't talk, when I started my study in university for the first time, the other students pointed at me and said 'o.k., we know you know something about English, don't speak and let the other to talk' ... and that cause me not to talk and lose my motivation in speaking English and lost my fluency in American accent (Interview, 18/08/2008).

Jafri stopped speaking when other classmates interpreted her behaviour as showing-off and asked her to give up L2 speaking. In fact others' negative or positive reaction to learners' performance in L2 communication might be perceived as face threatening in L2 communication and as an obstacle to speak in a target language.

Thus, it appears that L2 communicators, particularly when they might be perceived as L2 expert, experience L2 speaking as a potentially face threatening activity. Speakers perceived to be more fluent than others feel a fear of loss of face and a fear of displaying a lower level of proficiency than their partners in L2 communication. Fear of losing face encourages some participants to produce utterances with a higher level of accuracy while it might discourage and even prevent others from L2 speaking in front of others. However, the common effect of threats to loss of face on both groups of participants is a heightened feeling of anxiety and stress.

Over-evaluating the interlocutor's level of proficiency and attempts to speak with a higher level of accuracy in L2 interactions have been perceived as fostering stressful and anxious attempts prevent L2 learner from fluent speaking in L2 communication. To deal with this pressure and to minimize the anxiety and frustration they feel during less-than perfect performance in front of the others, participants use strategies to construct a friendly and cooperative L2 communication environment.

Generally speaking, these interviews shed light on participants' perception of interlocutors and its effect on their performance in L2 problematic communication. Participants' expectation of others seems to be constructed along the following variables: being known or unknown to each other, the background of their relationship, and the interlocutors' different status in proficiency, gender and social status in communication. Over-weighing the interlocutors' L2 proficiency and fear of displaying a lower level of proficiency than their partners are perceived as problem-makers in L2 communication since they threaten the participants' face, particularly when the interlocutor is a teacher.

5. MEANING CREATION PROBLEMS

5.1 Problems in Making a Message Intelligible

As complete understanding requires complete agreement on the meaning of symbols between different users, it is not an unusual if communicators experience misunderstanding in communication. For L2 communication in which people using L2 symbols with different perceptions, the problem of misunderstanding is more serious.

In addition to display high linguistic accuracy in L2 speaking, participants have also problem with meaning transfer in L2 communication. Amin talked about the priority of choosing the right means to transfer meaning over accurate pronunciation and intonation in her L2 speaking:

Amin: The most serious problem in speaking is that I didn't care about the pronunciation and intonation but thinking about meaning transfer. 'How to say' (forgetting the word, expression) is my major problem rather than 'what to say' (Interview, 31/08/2008).

As can be seen in the above extract, her problem was mainly to find a way to transfer the meaning in L2 communication by choosing the correct words. However, Najar has a different opinion:

Najar: I check my sentences in speaking for any error however for other learners conveying meaning might be more important than structure ... I try and am very concerned to produce correct grammatical complete sentences (Interview, 05/08/2008).

He believed that, in L2 speaking, producing error-free sentences which are grammatically correct is more important than mere meaning transfer.

Karb, another participant, identified both meaning transfer (*what I want to say*) and linguistic accuracy as two problem makers in his speaking.

Karb: As I was looking for what I want to say plus how to say it perfectly with complex compound sentences put me in problem during speaking (Interview, 23/08/2008).

Karb mentioned that what puts him in trouble during speaking is that he tried to transfer the meaning accurately with complex compound sentences in L2 speaking. I interpreted these three extracts to mean that participants' concern about the accuracy and quality of utterances in meaning transfer are responsible for part of problems participants experience in L2 oral communication.

6. CONTEXTUAL PROBLEMS IN L2 ORAL COMMUNICATION

That language use is intimately tied to its social context has been supported by researchers in the field of second and foreign language learning (Firth & Wagner, 1997; Candlin & Mercer, 2001; Atkinson, 2002). Some researchers (Lantolf, 1998; Donato, 2000; Storch, 2002) have been particularly critical of those scholars ignoring the social context in L2 oral interaction. While there is no doubt about the importance of 'taking context into account', there is substantial disagreement as to the level on which context should be approached: macro (external factors surrounding communication), or micro (internally-driven and dynamic factors) (Lafford, 2006: 3).

For our purpose, four factors, mentioned as central components in both micro and macro level, appear to be particularly relevant- the setting and the topic of communication.

6.1 The Setting

The setting of the current research was chosen inside an EFL context where L2 learners generally share a common mother tongue and have little or no natural exposure to the foreign language outside the classroom. Therefore, the classroom constitutes the primary (or only) target-language speech community for most of the language learners, who are remote from a larger target-language community.

In Iranian schools, English instruction consists of three to four hours a week, and is a required course from second grade junior high school. Non-native-speaking teachers and learners form the basis for most of their interaction in the target language. They are required to use a language in class that is different from the languages spoken in their home and community. Thus, language learners are frequently and increasingly each other's primary resource for language learning. However, there is an extended and still growing private sector, providing English courses for a variety of learning groups, even at primary school and even pre-school levels. In almost all private schools functioning within the three levels of general education in my research setting namely- primary, junior and high schools, English receives striking attention and probably extra hours of practice (Talebinezhad & Aliakbari, 2002: 21).

In spite of this, opportunities for interaction with NSs are all too infrequent and often simply impossible, and the written skill has received primacy over its spoken forms in Iranian EFL educational contexts. This orientation may result from a focus on learning using traditional grammar-translation methodology, since pedagogical grammar trends to focus on how to write correctly (Malmberg, 1993: 164, c.f. Skold, 2008: 1).

At university level, English is also an obligatory course for all students, usually taught for a specific academic purpose, and not for oral communication. During the period of English learning, they can practice English through English newspapers, English movies and Internet communication. Therefore, when students graduate, they have been learning English for several years. However, even for students studying in the Department of English and Language Studies who have probably been exposed to English for a longer time, L2 oral communication remains mostly limited to class interaction rather than real communication.

6.1.1 Lack of opportunity to Practice L2 Oral Communication

The participants in this study were all university students. However, they were not satisfied with their level of oral skill and were looking for opportunity to develop their language skill in L2 oral communication. The following interview extracts are useful for illustrating the types of difficulties leading the participants to learning rather than communicative orientation in L2 oral communication. Participants talk about the 'lacks' of current learning context to fulfil their expectation of an ideal learning context:

Amin: Before coming in university, I didn't have any special English language learning but high school language education including reading skill and vocabulary. In my BA study, I just passed the exams, did the class activities and graduated without any fluency in oral skill which I didn't take them seriously. By starting my MA in English language teaching, I found my speaking, my pronunciation and intonation very weak, and should do something. (Interview, 31/08/2008)

Kabiri: I began studying English when I was 11 in a language institute for 5 years. As time went by I understood I couldn't speak just I can read and write, and I don't like that because I want to be natural to speak as much as I can ... I prefer to speak English, in this study, and I like it, and I am interested in it (Interview, 31/08/2008).

As can be seen in the both above extracts of interviews, Amin and Kabiri were not satisfied with the oral performance opportunities offered in their past learning contexts. They also were aware of lack of communicative context to provide them opportunities for practicing L2 speaking out of their language classes:

Karb: I haven't been in opportunity to use my language (communicate) and feel 'ah it is good that I know language', and I stopped more practicing in English because I found it useless (Communication Events No, 11: 23/08/2008).

Karb stopped practising because he could not find any opportunity to communicate and use his target language. Jafri supported Karb's opinion by talking about lack of opportunity and partner for practising:

Jafri: Now and because of not having partner to practice speaking and discouraging environment for people who want to speak English out of the class made my communication skill really worse than before (Two friends interview, 18/08/2008).

Jafri identified the unsupportive environment out of the classroom and also the lack of partners as the main impediments to practising and as the main reason for low proficiency in L2 oral communication.

Participants in this study who experienced such a form-oriented educational setting found this research an opportunity to compensate for their lack of opportunities to practise and use their target language in an interpersonal communication.

6.1.2 Lack of Opportunity to Talk about L2 Oral Communication

Participants' orientation to L2 interaction has been influential in constructing the participants' oral performance in L2 communications. Batstone (2002: 4) distinguishes between two ends participants might aim at while using their target language: *communicative* and *learning* contexts. Context is perceived as communicative if language learners aim at the use of language in interpersonal communication to convey meaning in an appropriate way according to contextual cues; context is perceived as learning if learners focus on form and take risks toward the ultimate goal of improving their linguistic expertise.

In the following interview extracts, I summarized the participants' contextual orientation by reviewing their answer to my question about their reason of taking part in this study. It seems that participants were looking for an opportunity to talk about and discuss their problems in L2 learning and communication. They perceived this research as an opportunity to talk with an expert about their problems and to find possible answers to them:

Delgarm: I took part to tell someone what kind of problems we have here and how we can solve our problem within this system, why is this in our educational system situation (Interview, 11/08/2008).

Moazed: It was interesting, I didn't come here to practise, It was interesting for me what you want to do and what's your conclusion, what you get of all these discussion (Interview, 6/09/2008).

Kabiri: the experience of contacting with someone like you, to be subject of this research, it was interesting I need to experience to contact with someone like you ... the topics were fun because I had to something to practice (Interview, 6/09/2008).

In fact, participants aimed at discussing and exchanging information about their problems through taking part in my research. Their orientation was for learning during the communication events of this study. I interpreted that the lack of opportunities for learners to discuss language learners' oral problems in educational settings is one of the factors constructing problems in oral interaction in an EFL context. Therefore, almost all participants frequently demonstrated a strong interest in developing, establishing and maintaining social relation with other L2 users, in order to compensate for their lack of opportunities in their educational system.

6.2 Topic

The **topic of discourse** has been identified as one of the factors affecting the context of the communicative situation (Bou-Franch, 1994: 154). The topic of a task might significantly affect the ease of language use: familiarity with certain topics might enhance one's linguistic self-confidence, whereas a lack of this may hinder even a generally confident speaker (MacIntyre et.al, 1998: 554). There is research evidence that the interlocutors' content knowledge about the topic of discussion may result in being more verbally

forthcoming and can override certain limitations the speaker may have in his or her overall oral proficiency (Zuengler, 1993).

Lack of safe topic of discussion is also considered as one of obstacles in L2 speaking. Karb identifies unfamiliar topic as a problematic in speaking:

Karb: Speaking about unknown topic makes the speaking problematic. Thinking about new words or topic that you are not hearing or thinking before makes you spend time and then you need to do pause in L2 speaking. In fact, when you have no information about the topic or a word new for you is one of the sources make problematic speaking (Interview, 23/08/2008).

In his opinion, lack of information about the topic and hearing the new words and phrases in the partners' utterances make the meaning transfer problematic. Jafri considers the following topics too difficult: job, marriage, divorce and so on:

Jafri: my main problem is the topic when they are about jobs, getting married or divorce and something like that, because I don't have any experience and knowledge about those topics to talk about them. (Communication Events No, 11: 21/08/2008).

This opinion was supported by Salehi when she talked about the general and academic topic in L2 communication:

Saleh: Speaking in language classes are more about the routing and academic topic which are very different with natural every day conversation (Interview, 31/08/2008).

As general topics are not discussed in language classes, participants are faced with problems when the topic of discussion is chosen from every day conversation. Therefore, they are looking for opportunities for practice in every day topics than academic topics. I propose that offering discussion of free topics in this study probably encouraged participants to continue going to other sessions of group discussion, letting them to practise more oral skill in their target language.

The situation constructed based on lack of opportunity in educational setting to develop the learners' oral skill in order to communicate with other L2 users, particularly about every day topics, influences the atmosphere of EFL communication. EFL learners "learn" English in an artificial setting in language classes. As they do not have much opportunity to communicate in L2, their English speaking is not fluent nor proficient enough to use in real L2 interactions.

7. SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

How are problems constructed in EFL oral communication? This paper launched a communicative perspective to understand the nature of oral problems in foreign language learning and communication, a perspective which provides a means of being more familiar with the complexities of problem-construction in EFL oral communication. Using a systematic approach to go deeper in understanding the nature of problem-constructing process, this perspective consists of the three components as main sources of problem-makers: Communicators (speaker and listener), Message, and Context. Oral problems can be caused by participants' perception of an ideal L2 speaker, their interlocutors' characteristics, and contextual factors of L2 communication. These factors become 'inputs' for the creating meaning and responding process where communicators probably are faced with problems in self-expression and comprehension of others to convey their meaning with accurate utterances in an unsupportive and artificial L2 context.

Participants were insisting on and willing to define an ideal L2 user in communication as someone who displays perfect linguistic qualities while trying to getting the meaning across. With perfect linguistic expression having priority in participants' self-expectation, promoting the language accuracy probably interrupt the participants' oral performance in the L2 communication. In addition to self-expectation, participants' perception of, and even over-concern about, other interlocutors' comprehension reinforced their tendency to display an appropriate level of accuracy in front of the others in L2 communication. The perception of other interlocutors in L2 interaction, in my study, seems to be influenced by the interlocutors'

level of language proficiency, background of relationship, status and gender. When the interlocutor's level of proficiency and social status are perceived as higher than participants' ones, fear of losing face by displaying a lower level of proficiency impel the participants to either display higher levels of accuracy, or give up their speaking in L2 interactions.

Furthermore, participants claimed that they interpret a communicative situation as face threatening if their interlocutors are in a higher level of proficiency or status, or want to show off their ability in using complex language. Whether face-threatening or not, participants' expectation of and over-thinking about the interlocutor's level of proficiency and also their fear of speaking with a lower level of accuracy than the others have been perceived as an anxious and stressful challenge by the participants.

This finding challenges stereotypes about foreign language learners always being the only source of making problems in L2 communication. I argue that the other interlocutors' proficiency, gender and social status, and also the participants' perception of purpose and context of communication might influence the construction of problems in developing, establishing and maintaining interpersonal relations with other L2 users through the medium of the target language. However, it is the participants' own tendency and desire to speak like natives, an attitude which provides L2 users with a lot of pressure and puts them in an endless situation of always looking for opportunities in L2 interaction to develop their knowledge of the target language. Future research needs to focus on oral interactional discourse in order to study the features and structure of EFL discourse, the different roles of interlocutors and the contextual variables in making problems and strategies used in L2 communication. (7713 words)

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