# An Ecological Exploration of Iranian English as a Foreign Language Learners' Goal-directed Visions

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## A B S T R A C T

Recent conceptualizations of L2 motivation have regarded target language learners' goal-directed visions as the core feature of directed motivational currents; that is, a period of intense and enduring motivation in pursuit of a favorable personal vision. This study reports on a multiple-case study designed to explore the effective factors on  language learners' vision generation process in the context of Iran based on the framework developed by Dörnyei and Kubanyiova (2014). Taking into account that the notions of motivation and vision are no longer seen as stable individual difference factors, but as dynamic and continuously fluctuating ones, the present study takes an ecological analytical framework towards the issue applying Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1993) nested ecosystems model, involving four layers of context as: microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem. The participants of the study were four university students and the data were collected through semi-structured interviews, learning journals, and classroom observations during a period of six months. The results of the study revealed the existence of different eco-systemic agents and affordances in the emergence of the participants' goal-directed visions. They were parents' expectations and teachers' behavior at the microsystem, learners' background experiences at high school at the mesosystem, types of tests and materials at the exosystem and Iranians' competitive spirit at the macrosystem.

*Keywords:* ecological research; Directed Motivational Currents; goal-directed vision; nested ecosystems model

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**Introduction**

Research in the field of second language acquisition (SLA) has revealed that motivation plays a pivotal role in second and foreign language learning processes (e.g. Csizér & Dörnyei, 2005; Dörnyei, 1998, 2005, 2019; Dörnyei & AL-Hoorie, 2017; Gardner, 2001; You, Dörnyei, & Csizér, 2016). Most of the studies on L2 motivation have been conducted from a quantitative-explanatory perspective (see Boo, Dörnye, & Ryan, 2015 for a review of these studies). However, Dörnyei and Ushioda's (2011) paper rendered a socio-dynamic shift of attention in the field of applied linguistics on the L2 motivation dynamism which is mainly contingent upon learning context. Following this dynamic turn, a paradigm shift from traditional viewpoints of L2 motivation in terms of its straightforward cause-effect associations to a complex dynamic view point of the construct in terms of its dynamic emergent patterns took place (Waninge, de Bot, & Dörnyei, 2014). Within this dynamic perspective to L2 motivation, motivation has been recently viewed as drives which energize "long term, sustained behavior" (Muir & Dörnyei, 2013, p. 357). These drives are called Directed Motivational Currents (DMCs) (Dörnyei, Henry, & Muir, 2015; Dörnyei, Muir, & Ibrahim, 2014).

In the construction of DMCs, goal-directed visions play a central role (Muir & Dörnyei, 2013). DMCs emerge from "a prolonged process of engagement in a series of tasks which are rewarding primarily because they transform the individual towards a highly valued end" (Dörnyei, Ibrahim, Muir, 2015, p. 98). This highly valued end renders the development of   "goal/vision orientedness" prior to   "positive emotionality", and "salient facilitative construct" in the emergence of DMCs (Henry et al., 2015, p.330). Vision is defined as a "mental representation of the sensory experience of a future goal state" (Muir & Dörnyei, 2013, p. 357). That is, in order to empower individuals as performing activities on the way striving for their goal, students should be provided with a compelling vision of a successful target language learner to build up a solid ground for DMCs to emerge (Muir & Dörnyei, 2013). In other words, a learner's yet-to-come image of him/her  as a successful language learner/user grows into who he/she currently is as the learning tasks move him/her from the classroom context to the fantasy of him/her communicating with target language speakers (Henry et al., 2015).

From a dynamic perspective, "a vision in isolation is not necessarily sufficient to inspire motivated action" (Muir & Dörnyei, 2013, p. 358) but the emergence of a goal-directed vision needs to be paved by a contextual structure; otherwise, nothing can remain but mere fantasy. Language learning does not take place in a contextual vacuum but it is a social process in which ecologically situated individuals are active to pursue both their linguistic and non-linguistic goals (Darvin & Norton 2015; Guerrettaz & Johnston, 2013, 2014; Lantolf, 2013; Morgan & Martin, 2014). The context of learning encompasses different affordances, social agents, and discourses (Morgan & Martin, 2014; Palfreyman, 2014). Therefore, an ecological approach to vision helps us to move away from the encapsulated view of L2 learners' visions, solely in association with their cognitive predispositions or personality qualities, by acknowledging the eco-systemic processes of particular learning communities including the learners' past learning experiences, their agency, classroom affordances and practices, the interplay of eco-systemic factors as well as the influence of contextual constraints. Within this ecological perspective, particular attention is paid to an individual's temporal development, in particular sociocultural contexts, "implicating the person's unique history and future aspirations" (i.e. looking not only at the present but at past causes and expected outcomes) (Lamb 2013, p. 32).   Since the process of DMCs building is dynamically dependent on learning context (Dörnyei, 2009; Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009; Dörnyei & Chan, 2013), in this multiple case study, we aimed to explore the emerging patterns of some English as a foreign language (EFL) students' goal-directed vision from an ecological perspective. Since from a dynamic perspective, the emergence of L2 learners' visions is process oriented, in what follows we first explain this process-oriented framework of goal directed vision developed by Dörnyei and Kubanyiova (2014).

### *Framework of Successful Language Learning Visions*

The relative success of a DMC depends on the establishment and internalization of a clear vision (Muir & Dörnyei, 2013). This should be done based on a set of criteria  (Dörnyei & Kubanyiova, 2014). First, to develop a powerful future self-image, students should make a vision of themselves in which they become an L2 user. Based on a primary definition of vision as "the imitative representation of real or hypothetical events" (Pham & Taylor, 1999, p. 250), EFL learners' visions can be the imitative representation of L2 related events such as communicating in English language with foreigners, giving an academic lecture in English, listening to English language news channels, reading an English novel, to name a few. In the construction of these visions, the representation of these events is present but "the stimulus is not actually being perceived" (Kosslyn, Ganis, & Thompson, 2001, p. 4).

Second, learners should strengthen their created vision by elaborating on them and rendering them vivid for themselves. For this, van der Helm (2009) suggested that visions should capture a desire for a deliberate change, the ideal, and the future. Third, only *plausible* visions can raise the learners' motivation because they are in alignment with the learners' present situation.  Regarding this plausibility, Pizzolato (2006) asserted that "the relationship between what the learners want to become and what students actually become may be mediated by what students feel they are able to become" (p. 59). Also, this plausibility can be associated with Dörnyei and Chan's (2013) view of a vision "as the sensory experience of a future goal state" (p. 454) in which vision is regarded as a personalized goal that an individual can make it his or her own by "adding to it the imagined reality of the goal experience" (p. 455). Fourth, learners should take steps to turn their visions into action. This requires active involvement of  learners in the application of effective strategies which set the stage for the implementation of their visions (Dörnyei & Kubanyiova, 2014).

Fifth, the acquired vision should stay sustained and alive; otherwise, they might vanish since learners  may not be  engaged, cognitively and affectively, in the process of activating their visions (Dörnyei & Kubanyiova, 2014). Regarding this livelihood of vision, Cox (2012) asserted that human brain can hardly distinguish between an event that is taking place in reality and an elaborated vision of the same event. This might be due to the fact that all the learners' senses can be used in their imagery (Eardley & Pring, 2006); that is, "vision is multisensory in nature, involving all the senses and not just visualization" (Dörnyei & Chan, 2013, p. 21). Hence, learners should constantly focus, and pushed to focus, on their created visions so that they can see, feel, and experience themselves in the imagined event (Pham & Taylor, 1999). This, as suggested by Vasquez and Buehler (2007), can take place by both first person and third person imagery perspectives. Via a first person perspective, a leaner imagines an event as if it were experienced by him or her in reality.

On the other hand, through a third person perspective, a learner engages in a vision by watching the created vision. The first person perspective might enhance a learners' self-efficacy in doing his or her imagined L2 related events (Dörnyei & Kubanyiova, 2014) while a third person perspective contributes to a learner's motivation by allowing for " a greater tendency to focus on the event's coherence with the self-conept" ( Libby & Eibach, 2011, p. 718). Finally, learners should encounter their overwhelming fear of failure at achieving their future self-image. This step   can be practiced to generate, maintain, and, foster learners' motivation to direct them towards their ideal future L2 selves (Dörnyei & Kubanyiova, 2014).

Table 1
*A Framework for Developing a Vision-centered Teaching Practice*

| Motivational conditions for desired language selves | Key facets of a vision-centered future motivational practice |
|---|---|
| The learners have a desired future self-image (vision) which is related to but is also different from his/her current self-concept. | Creating the language learners' vision |
| The vision is elaborated and vivid. | Strengthening the vision trough imagery enhancement |
| The vision is perceived as plausible but not comfortably certain, and it does not clash with other parts of the individuals' self-concept, particularly with the learners' family and peers. | Sustaining the vision by Making it plausible |
| The vision is accompanied by relevant effective procedural strategies that act as a road map | Transforming the vision into action |
| The vision is regularly activated in the learners' working self-concept | Keeping the vision alive |
| The learner is also aware of the negative consequences of not achieving the desired end state. | Counterbalancing the vision by considering failure |

Drawing an inference based on Dörnyei and Kubaniyova's ( 2014) framework of vision-formation process, we can postulate  that this process is dynamic and  state-oriented, which is in line with the process-oriented view of  motivation  (Dörnyei, 2009; Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009). In other words, as vivid in this dynamic model of vision, the construction of goal-directed visions is not necessarily the result of some linear cause-effect rules but visions *emerge* from some nonlinear, random, unexpected patterns. This can be closely associated with the principles of ecology (van Lier, 2004, 2011). Inspired by Morgan & Martin (2014) we can conjecture that from an ecological perspective, to construct their visions, learners are supposed to imagine recursively "to identify and create new patterns of coherence…across the rich interpersonal histories" (Morgan & Martin, 2014, p. 668) which underlie their EFL education background. These patterns vary in terms of time and space, "in which immediate micro-contexts are aligned with larger and longer-term macro contexts" (Morgan & Martin, 2014, p. 668), and affordances for learners' agency in the creation of plausible, active, and live visions are provided.

Furthermore, within micro-context, classroom for example, other agents like teachers and peers as well as the potential situated affordances like classroom materials  might contribute to the emergence of  EFL learners' directed visions. Moreover, this dynamic view towards vision is in accordance with the fact that "L2 learners do not form ergodic ensembles" (Lowie & Verspoor, 2019). "An ensemble is ergodic if two types of statistics give the same result. Many ensembles, like the human population, are not ergodic" (Tarko, 2005, as cited in Lowie & Verspoor, 2019, p. 185). Thus, learners might go through different trajectories of vision over time. Due to this ergodicity problem in research on individual differences, "we cannot generalize group statistics to the individual and vice-versa" (Lowie & Verspoor, 2019, p. 185). Regarding the significance of validating the dynamicity within the nature of motivation (Dörnyei, 2001; Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015; Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009; Ushioda, 1994) which is represented in Dörnyei and Kubaniyova's ( 2014) framework of goal-directed visions as well as Lowie and Verspoor's (2019) invitation of researchers to investigate individual differences via *case studies* due to the ergodicity problem, in this study we aimed to explore the emergent patterns of some Iranian EFL learners'  goal-directed visions  from an ecological dynamic perspective.

Considering the main principle of an ecological perspective which is the search for the interaction of diverse eco-systemic factors which contribute to the emergence of the patterns of a phenomenon, like EFL learners' goal-directed visions (van Lier, 2004) we maintain that an ecological  perspective is suitable for the aim of this study for the following reasons). An ecological perspective provides the researchers with a bright insight about the interaction of the organisms, the learners for example, within different contextual layers, in the construction of a phenomenon (van Lier, 2004). In line with this orientation, an ecological approach takes into account the interaction of language learners and all their associated affective, cognitive, and linguistic variables with the other agents, like their teachers and peers, in the classroom, and their parents, out of the classroom, in the construction of their visions. This ecological orientation within the micro-system of the classroom can be seen in the following quotation by Larsen-Freeman (2016, p.376):

> *Components of the classroom ecology are agents, the teacher, and the students concerning their thoughts, emotions, embodied actions, behaviors, dispositions, social capital, identities etc., and temporary physical and environmental properties. For instance, the configuration of the desks, the size of the room, its orientation, its temperature, the time of the day/week/year at which the lesson is conducted, and so on, all potentially influence teaching and learning.*

Second, as a pivotal concept in an ecological perspective, emergence, as defined by Larsen-Freeman (2016) is "the arising of something new, often unanticipated, from the interaction of components which comprise it" (p.378). For instance, teachers' agency in their interactions with a learner as well as the use of diverse and appropriate resources and materials within the context of the classroom might lead to the emergence of new perceptions in the learner (Mercer, 2012). This means that the trajectories of goal-directed visions in learning English for a learner, in alignment with the ergodicity problem (Lowie & Verspoor, 2019) might emerge differently from another learner due to the interaction of different components, like agents and affordances. Thus, an ecological approach to goal-directed visions can help us explore the unique emergent patterns of visions for each EFL learner because these patterns are variable across his or her learning process (Rose, Rouhani, & Fischer, 2013).

To provide the ecological approach with an explanatory framework, different models have been used; however, the main one which has been frequently applied by researchers is the nested ecosystem model proposed by Bronfenbrenner (1993).

### Bronfenbrenner's Nested Ecosystem Model

Bronfenbrenner's nested ecosystem model meticulously scrutinizes human behavior and development within a number of interdependent and interconnected structures which are termed ecosystems (Bronfenbrenner, 1993). Along the lines of this model, every context consists of four ecosystems. First; microsystem, as the first and closest stratum of every learning context to the learners, encompasses "patterns of activities, roles, and interpersonal relations experienced by the developing person in a given setting" (Bronfenbrenner, 1993, p. 15), like the classroom context. Second, mesosystem comprises the connections and interactions between two or more settings including the learner under investigation (Bronfenbrenner, 1993); for example, the interaction between a learners' past experiences of learning English and his or her current learning of English.

Third, exosystem concerns "the linkages and processes taking place between two or more settings at least one of which does not contain the developing person, but indirectly affects the individuals' behavior in the immediate setting" (Bronfenbrenner, 1993, p. 24). For instance, the regulations and policies of a language institute might enhance the dynamics of vision construction in each learner but the learner has no role in these regulations and policies. Fourth, macro system

concerns the predominant, societal and cultural, norms and beliefs behind particular fundamental belief systems (see Table 2). This model has been recently used in the field of applied linguistics for different ecological purposes. For example, it has been applied to explore the emerging patterns of L2 willingness to communicate (Peng, 2012), foreign language anxiety (Gkonou, 2017), foreign language speaking anxiety (Kasbi & Elahi Shirvan, 2017) and foreign language writing anxiety (Saghafi, Adel, & Zareian, 2017). Also, Hiver and Al-Hoorie (2016) introduced a similar framework for research on complex systems in learning a second language, entitled dynamic ensemble, which encompasses the main considerations of nested ecosystem model such as contextual considerations, micro and macro-system considerations.

Table 2
*Operationalisation of Ecosystems and Examples of Contextual Elements*

| Level | Operationalization | Example |
|-------|-------------------|---------|
| Micro | Context of EFL classroom | Parents' attitudes, beliefs, behaviour, and teacher method |
| Meso | The interaction between the classroom and other settings containing the students | Learners' previouse learning and extra curricular activities |
| Exo | The interaction between the classroom and other settings, that one of which does not contain the students and indirectly affects them | Type of tests, tasks, materials, and lack of devoted time on the course |
| Macro | The educational system of the society, cultural patterns, and values | Dominant social condition and educational policies |

Considering the need for the investigation of the dynamic process of individual learners' goal-directed visions in learning English via appropriate research approaches like an ecological approach the following research questions were proposed for the aim of this case study:

1.  What  micro-systemic factors contribute to the emergence of goal-oriented visions in the EFL learners of this study?

2.  2. What meso-systemic factors contribute to the emergence of goal-oriented visions in the EFL learners of this study?

3.  What exo-systemic factors contribute to the emergence of goal-oriented visions in the EFL learners of this study?

4.  What macro-systemic factors contribute to the emergence of goal-oriented visions in the EFL learners of this study?

In line with Lowie and Verspoor's (2019) suggestion for conducting case studies in research on individual differences, due the ergodicity problem, we aimed to explore  goal-directed visions in only four EFL learners via an emic perspective, by which we do not aim to generalize the findings of our study due to the context-sensitive nature of goal-directed visions.

## Methodology

### Context and Participants

This study was carried out over a period of six months in the academic year of 2015-16. The main criterion for the selection of the participants was that the participants should be a representation of a normal class, which encompasses a diversity of students in terms of experiences of vision construction and learning experiences. As previously mentioned, due the nature of ecological

approach (van Lier, 2004) and the ergodicity problem in the research on individual differences (Lowie & Verspoor, 2019), for the purpose of this case study, we selected four students from a class of general English. The participants were four freshman male students studying English as a general course at University of Bojnord, Iran. Considering the criteria of diversity in construction of goal-directed visions, representing a normal classroom, we selected the four participants based on our classroom observation and consultation with their course teacher. Their age ranged from 20 to 26. Demographic information of the participants, including their age, gender, university year, their language learning and vision construction experiences are presented in Table 3. The names of the participants were replaced with pseudonyms for the sake of confidentiality.

Table 3
*Participants' Profiles*

| Participants | Reza | Farhad | Arash | Ali |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Age | 26 | 23 | 25 | 21 |
| Gender | Male | Male | Male | Male |
| University year | 1st | 1st | 1st | 1st |
| Years of experience in formal language learning | 8 years | 5 years | 6 years | 3 years |
| Students' generated vision | He had a view of what he would like to become, and he created L2 visions, and was an internally motivated language learner | He was a motivated language learner, he had created an L2 vision, but he had received negative influences from his environment | Despite his construction of a goal-directed vision, it was not in harmony with his present situation, and this prevented him from achieving his vision. | He was not an internally motivated language learner, and he had generated his vision under the influence of his context. |

### Data Collection

For the purpose of this case study, multiple data were collected through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and learning journals. Following a long-term observation, we observed each learner twice a month via observational field-notes, for four months, in order to build an in-depth view of their created visions in their process of language learning and observe the dynamics of these visions. The guide for this observation phase was the framework of goal-directed vision by Dörnyei and Kubanyiova (2014) and the factors influencing the process of the participants' vision construction within the micro-system of the classroom. At the end of the observation phase, we collected 48 observation field notes.

Also, after each observation session, we interviewed each participant individually (48 interviews). In the first session of interview, we focused on building rapport with each participant and exploring the reasons regarding their participation in previous English classes and any goal-directed visions they had already created in those classes. We particularly addressed their vision of what they wanted to become by participating in those classes. In the next interview sessions, based on the points we observed in each session, we asked each participant whether he had generated any specific vision of his future L2 self or not and, depending on each session and the state of each participant's vision (the six steps of the vision framework), we asked them different questions (see Appendix A for the interview guide). In our interviews, we also explored the ecological affordances and agents underlying any changes or developments in each participant's

vision inside and outside the classroom. The interviews were conducted in the participants' first language, Persian.

In addition, we asked each participant   to write a journal regarding their experiences in the classroom and the dynamics of their vision construction, after each session of observation and interview (48 journals). The topics of journals were mainly around the possible role of strategies and the activities that were used by the participants as affordances in the development of their visions as well as the role of their teachers or any other influencing people outside their classroom, like their parents, that could contribute to the construction of their vision (see Appendix B for the journal guide).

*Data Analysis*

This study takes a qualitative interpretive approach (Richards, 2003), intending to provide an in-depth description of the participants' goal-directed vision. The data analysis of the collected interviews, journals and observations involved reading, coding, and revising the codes by both authors of this study. The coding was based on the ecological aspects of each participant's development of goal-directed visions. The codes were extracted from the Bronfenbrenners' nested ecosystem model (1993), using MAXQDA software program, (Belous, 2012), with the primary focus on the microsystem (i.e. the language learner); the other three ecosystems were explored when observed in the data. As a measure of trustworthiness in the coding process, the inter-coder reliability was 92%.

**Results and Discussion**

The results of the study as well as their related discussions are presented in line with research questions presented for this study.

*At the microsystematic level*

Two effective micro-systemic factors were identified which contributed to the construction of the participants' goal-directed visions. They were the participants' parents' expectations and their teacher's behavior in the classroom.

*Parents' expectations*

Extracted quotes from Reza in the first stage of moving towards his generated vision shows that this participant already had a view of what he would like to become in his future life. This participant referred to the point that he was internally motivated to learn English due to the positive feedback and affordances he received from his parents. In one of the interview sessions he said: "I aim to be a fluent speaker of English language and I'm motivated enough to follow this vision as my parents are constantly encouraging me to move towards this future goal of mine" (Interview 6, December 6, 2015). He also referred to the point that as long as he received positive affordances from his parents, he was motivated to move toward his generated vision by taking the classroom activities seriously so that he could turn this vision into a live and tangible one for himself and his parents. In other words, his parents and their expectations paved the way for the development of his created vision further in future in the framework to be strengthened, and transferred into action.

Opposite to Reza's case, Farhad and Arash's motivation was internally oriented. Thus, they were able to create a clear image of what they wanted to achieve during the process of their English language learning; however, they received negative influences from their parents. This is clearly echoed in their quotations. For example Farhad reported:

> …*I think my future vision is not that much plausible. The reason is that it is something my parents do not agree with. Thus, because of this disagreement of theirs I feel I'm losing my motivation in trying to reach my future goal. (Interview 5, November 22, 2015)*

Arash also noted:

> *… I have a vision of what I'm looking for in the process of language learning, but the main problem in reaching my goal is that my parents do not agree on the future career that I have selected for myself" (Observation 1, September 23, 2015)*

As seen in Farhad and Arash' case, their created images were not in harmony with their present situation and this might prevent them from achieving what they have already envisaged. As seen in the above quotation, parents' expectations at the level of microsystem can directly affect individuals' level of motivation. That is, due to the negative influences they have received from their closest context, their created vision was not strengthened; thus, it was plausible to them, they could not transform it into action and, consequently, their motivation notably reduced.

As a prerequisite for any goal-directed vision, the learners should add "to it the imagined reality of the goal experience" (Dörnyei & Chan, 2013, p. 455). Not being able to add this imagined reality to the experiences of their goals due to the inconsistency between their initiated goals and those expected by their parents, the trajectory of vision construction in Farhad and Arash are different from that of Reza and; hence, not plausible.

Considering his goal-oriented future vision, Ali echoed:

> *Yes, I have an idea of what I should become in the future, but I'm afraid this is not what I want to become. I mean I have a view of my future life, I'm not that much interested in it though and the reason is that this is something that I have to be or better to say I'm forced to become and it's just because of the context I'm living in. (Interview1, September 23, 2015)*

In fact, Ali generated a vision for himself which was directly under the influence of his external environment, not his internal desires. As seen in the above quotations, all of the participants indicated that they were under the influence of their parents' points of view and expectations in their construction of a specific future goal-directed vision, both negatively and positively. Thus, espoused by the concept of ecology (van Lier, 2004) and the fact that "immediate micro-contexts are aligned with larger and longer-term macro-contexts" (Morgan & Martin, 2014, p. 668), the participants' agency in the construction of visions is under the influence of a strong contextual affordance, the role of parents, which should not be overlooked as a significant contextual consideration (Hiver & Al-Hoorie, 2016). This contextual factor is formalized into the microsystem of the participants' created visions in two ways: it can either facilitate the process of their' vision making, by setting a parallel stage for the learners' visions so that they can accomplish them with more motivation, or debilitate this process, by directing learners in an undesirable path in which they might be in a dilemma in terms of the visions they are to create.

In terms of the micro-systemic adaptation of learners' visions to the contextual factor of parents' expectations (Hiver & Al-Hoorie, 2016), the consistency of the parents' expectations with the learners' vision can contribute to the development of vision going through most of stages of

Dörnyei and Kubanyiova's (2014) framework; that is, the created vison can be strenghthend, be plausible, and transformed into action but in case of the inconsistency between the parents' expectations and the learners' visions, the emergent patterns of the created visons might not be able to go beyond the level of creation because the created visons are deprived of the strengthening power of parents' expectations.

*Teachers' Behavior*

The relationship between the participants and their teacher in the classroom was also revealed to be an important micro-systemic factor in the development of their goal-directed visions. In terms of the ecological interactions between the micro-systemic factors, this factor can be in accordance with or in contrast to the participants' expectations of their parents.

Regarding the role of the teacher, in one of the interviews Reza noted: "Actually, it was the English teacher who gave me incentives to generate my vision for learning English, I aim to have a good comprehension of the media in English and this is what my dad appreciated the most in my family too" (Interview1, September 23, 2015). As seen in this quotation, the teacher's role, as an initial condition in the process of Reza's development of his desirable vision can be promising. In other words, in line with the feature of a complex dynamic system, L2 goal-directed visions, as seen in Reza's case, are sensitive to the slight changes in the initial conditions (Verspoor, 2015), like the teacher's behavior in the classroom. Moreover, in these initial conditions, the agreement between parents' expectations of participants and their teachers' motivating behaviors can both contribute to the generation of goal-directed visions of learning.

Similarly, Farhad noted that the course teacher played an encouraging role in the development of his goal-directed vision. Experiencing the fifth stage of the vision framework (Dörnyei & Kubanyiova, 2014), he asserted: "My teacher is always a source of inspiration to me and because of his high fluency in English; I have always tried to follow him as a role model to be fluent speaker of English language" (Journal 9, January 21, 2016). Thus, it can be inferred that despite the parents' opposing orientation towards the visions generated by learners, their teachers can play the role of a strong contextual agent influencing their goal-oriented visions.

Likewise, the teacher had a positive impact on Arash's vision. Experiencing the third stage of the framework, in one of his journals, he wrote: "… [my teacher] was like a friend to me and constantly tried to promote my motivation by making me engaged in a variety of activities and giving me positive feedback. Sometimes at home, my parents still insisted on my changing my major, which can shatter the beautiful visions I have already created for myself, like being an English news reader or an interpreter, but the time I entered the class, following my teacher' advice, I felt that those visions were more approachable. During the past sessions of the course, he has also provided me with videos of successful news anchors and interpreters. Watching them has helped me so much to strengthen these images of mine because since then I am imagining myself doing this activity for a famous news channel. Last session, he also gave me the chance to read a piece of news for the students in the class which definitely boosted my confidence as I found my vision so live and real in the class. I am also practicing to interpret some short talks for the next session of the course (Journal 5, November 22, 2015).

As seen in both Arash and Farhad's cases of vision construction, there is a disagreement between parents' expectations of the participants and those of their teacher. In terms of the interplay of the factors within the micro-system of the classroom, once the participants' created images for themselves were about to fade due to their misaligned parental expectations, the positive influences of their teacher's feedback and behavior as well as his classroom assignments could push their vision ahead in the vision framework, providing them with opportunities to turn their

vision into reality and make them active and alive. For instance, led by the teacher's assignments in the classroom, Arash could experience both first person and third person imagery perspectives (Vasquez & Buehler, 2007). In alignment with Libby and Eibach (2011), the experience of watching successful news readers could help him to imagine the event as if it were his, which; as a result, strengthened the coherence of the vision. Also, in line with Dörnyei and Kubanyiova (2014), the experience of reading some news in English language in the classroom increased Arash's self-efficacy in his vision as a news anchor.

Considering all four participants and what they had referred to regarding the effective factors at the level of microsystem, we can infer that participants' parents and their teachers are among the influencing affordances in the emergence of their' agency in the generation of vision within their immediate context of their learning English, which is the classroom. In term s of their micro-systemic network of interactions (Hiver & Al-Hoorie, 2016; Larsen-Freeman, 2016), these two affordances might play in harmony with or in opposite to each other; having positive or negative impacts on the learners' emergent patterns of goal-oriented visions. For instance, For Reza, both parents' expectations and teacher's behaviors are in accordance with each other and this synergy contributed to his progress in the framework of vision in terms of strengthening his generated vision and making it alive or plausible. However, For Farhad and Arash, a conflict between his parents' vision-shattering behaviors and the teachers' vision-supporting behaviors as two major mechanisms of change (Hiver & Al-Hoorie, 2016) were observed. In these two cases, both participants experienced contradictory emerging patterns of vision from the two micro-systemic factors. Thus, due to the existence of such inconsistencies, their success in achieving their future goal-oriented visions is not easily predictable.

### At the Meso-systematic level

The participants' past learning experience was revealed to be an important meso-systemic factor contributing to their development of goal-directed visions. For instance, Reza wrote in one of his journals that he was a motivated language learner and he already knew the value of learning English language in the achievement of his goals due to his positive previous learning experiences. He reported he was always appreciated by his language teacher at high school.

> ….*my language teacher at high school constantly encouraged all the learners in the class to do their best in learning English. He always presented communicative activities and it helped me create my future life image through those activities. So having such good learning experiences, I think, helped me to remain a motivated and dedicated language learner at the present time. (Journal 9, January 21, 2016)*

Considering Reza's case, it seems that the meso-systemic experiences of the participants play an active role in shaping the trajectories of each participant in his construction of visions. Also, among these meso-systemic experiences, as seen in Reza's written journal, is the type of activities presented by his high school teacher in the classroom. The communicative nature of the activities he was involved in at high school helped him in generating a future vision.

Likewise, referring to one of his previous learning experiences, Arash could make his generated vision alive. He explained:

> … *I constantly imagine the day that I'm a tour leader and every day I play this role. This activity is so helpful in keeping me motivated. I was inspired to construct this vision by a useful activity introduced by my teacher in one of my classes at an English language learning institute and role-played by me and my classmates. (Interview 9, January 21, 2016)*

This past learning activity could help Arash to experience a first-perspective imagery (Vasquez & Buehler, 2007) in which he constantly constructs a live image of his goal. Thus, in alignment with Morgan and Martin (2014), Arash and Reza's past learning experiences can be regarded as rich personal histories which helped them to identity new coherent patterns of vision.

On the contrary, Ali attributed his negative attitude towards learning English to his unfavorable language learning experiences at high school. In one of the interviews, he stated:

> …*when I was a high school student, my teachers were all passive ones, without having new ideas in teaching, so in my English courses, I experienced boring moments, I think I have lost all my interest and motivation in learning English. At the moment I can't come up with any visions for learning English. (Interview 4, November 6, 2015)*

As seen in the above quotation, unlike Reza, Ali was not able to generate a future vision due to his negative experiences at high school. Moreover, regarding the type of activities presented by his high school teachers in the classroom, Ali said: "..there were no interesting and communicative activities in the classroom. They were just grammar focused activities, extremely long and exhausting…" (Observation1, September 23, 2015).

In terms of the networked associations between the eco-systemic contextual factors (Hiver & Al-Hoorie, 2016; Morgan & Martin, 2014), it seems that the power of these factors either at the micro-system or meso-system can shape the dominant mechanism of change or stability in the emergence of the stages of goal-directed visions. The meso-systemic experiences of the participants might overshadow the interaction of the micro-systemic factors like the participants' parents' expectations and their own created visions. Thus, positive background experiences can push the created visions of the participants into strengthened and plausible patterns regardless of the consistencies and conflicts between their parents' expectations and their desirable tendencies. However, the participants' negative experiences might weaken their created patterns of visions, emerging from the interplay between their preferences and their parents' expectations. On the other hand, we should bear in mind that the dominant micro-systemic factors can also exert influence on the meso-systemic factors which influence the construction of visions. For instance, consistency between EFL learners' orientations and their parents' expectations can impact on the meso-systemic factors, like their negative background experiences, and pave the way for the emergence of live, plausible, and strengthened visions.

### At the Exo-systemic Level

At this level, the participants' patterns of goal directed visions might be under the indirect impact of some external factors, which might positively or negatively affect their meso-systemic or micro-systemic experiences. Among these external factors, the type of tests and materials used in the class were highlighted by the participants. It is worth noting that in the general course of English that the participants attended, the materials and the syllabus were mainly organized by the department of English language; thus, the course teacher had limited options in terms of deciding on the course book to be used for the course. Thefore, since the activities and the tests that the participants referred to in this section are related to their course book, we regarded them as exo-systemic factors.

Considering the language learners' problems with the type of materials used in the course of general English at the university level, both Farhad and Arash pointed out how presented materials were overshadowing their directed visions. In one of the interviews Farhad maintained:

> …*the main focus of this course and the activities at university level is on grammar and developing reading skills, with fewer opportunities for communication to develop speaking ability. So, the course sometimes becomes tedious to*

> *me and; as a result, gradually, I might not be able to follow the vision I have set for myself. (Interview 7, December 22, 2015)*

Arash also referred to the influence of the presented materials and types of tests on his motivation. In fact, since he was trying to improve his speaking ability and fluency in English [his generated vision] and was less focused on developing his grammar, he had some serious problems with some of the materials and tests in the course of general English. He noted:

> *…I couldn't turn my directed visions active because of some of the classroom activities, but not all, and the materials targeting grammar with less chance for communication…Also, tests in the class mainly focus on grammatical points and I have problems taking them because of the nature of these tests… (Journal 4, November 6, 2015)*

As seen above, both participants referred to two exo-systemic factors influencing the construction and development of their goal-directed visions; first, classroom materials and activities with a main focus on grammatical points and; second, types of tests mainly assessing learners' understanding of those grammatical points. Thus, we can argue that although the participants were able to generate and strengthen the goal-oriented visions of what they intended to achieve by learning a foreign language, they were unlikely to transform them into action or keep them alive due to the fact that proper materials as well as road maps were rarely presented to them at the exosystemic level. In other words, the materials used in the class did not play the role of an affordance, but only an input, because they were decided to be used in the class not by the teacher of the class but the supervision team of the institute who might have less ecological awareness about the context of the classroom than the teacher of the class. Therefore, the materials prescribed to be used in the class cannot seriously contribute to the construction of the participants' goal-directed visions unless the teacher of the class can develop his or her own teacher-made materials or select appropriate materials, considering the contextual needs of his classroom.

### At the Macro-systemic Level

Referring to this level of context, the social, cultural, and educational belief system of the society, which is the most distant level to individuals, both the participants and their teacher, can indirectly impact on individuals. Arash referred to one of these macro-systemic factors in one of his interviews. He said: "English is a foreign language in my country. I think that's why it is not the main target of the educational system. So, EFL learners may find it difficult to provide directed visions for learning English". (Interview 8, January 5, 2016).

As seen in the above quotation, Arash referred to lack of adequate attention to the course of English in the education system of Iran and its associated influence on the process of achieving a directed future vision by learners of English. Regarded as a foreign language, English language has not been assigned a serious program by the education system of Iran to be learned at secondary, tertiary, and university level. Therefore, not being exposed to English language, learners of English language might encounter difficulties in any stages of the development of goal-directed visions. In terms of eco-systemic network of interactions in the development of these visions ( Morgan & Martin, 2014; van Lier, 2004), we can conjecture that teachers' performance in the microsystem, learners' background experiences at the level of  the mesosystem, and the types of materials and assessment  applied at the level of exosystem might be overshadowed by the influences of the dominant attitude towards English as a foreign language at the level of macrosystem with regard to learners' goal-directed visions. In other words, in our observed case, although the teacher's motivating performance sets the stage for the learners' initiated visions, lack of a well-established program for learning English by the education system, rooted in the social attitude towards

English as a foreign language, might not provide learners with a clear road map to develop their visions.

As an example of positive influences of macrosystem on individuals' goal-directed visions, Ali reported how he was positively influenced by the dominant competitive spirit activated within the Iranian culture.

> *...seeing how hard my classmates try to reach their goals is a source of inspiration for me to try harder to reach my future vision. I think all my classmates are competitive and make their efforts to outscore the others (Observation7, December 22, 2015)*

As seen in the above quotation, Ali referred to his and his classmates' competitive spirit as a macro-systemic factor existing within the culture of Iran, which is rooted in the competitive atmosphere of Iranian education system. Put it another way, the presence of a competitive spirit among learners emerging from a competitive atmosphere in society, at the level of macrosystem, can contribute to the development of EFL learners' goal- directed visions within the microsystem of the classroom.

## Conclusion

In constructing a specific future goal-directed vision, learners of English language might be under the influence of a variety of contextual factors. These contextual factors, which lie within different ecological layers, make the trajectories of vision construction unique for each EFL learner. Regarding the importance of generating a vision of what university students in the course of general English aim to become and its crucial role in improving language learners' DMCs, the present case study aimed to describe and explain the dynamic patterns of directed future visions, based on Dörnyei and Kubanyiova's (2014) framework, for learning English from an ecological perspective, using Bronfenbrenners' nested ecosystem as an analytical framework. The findings of the study indicate that the participants' patterns of goal-directed vision can be explained under the dynamic influences of micro-, meso-, exo-, and macrsystems. At the level of microsystem, the teacher's motivating behaviors towards the participants, consistent or inconsistent with their parents' expectations, contributed to the creation of directed visions. At the level of mesosystem, under the influence of favorable and unfavorable background experiences at high school or English language institutes, the participants' trajectories of vision emerged differently. In addition, at the level of exo-system, assessment targets and the types of materials, set to be used in the course of general English, as well as the competitive spirit dominant in the Iranian culture and the social attitude towards English language as a foreign language, at the level macrosystem, could explain the dynamics of the participants' directed visions and the stage they could be activated. Regarding the pedagogical implications of the findings of this study, we contend that teachers of English language should consider the capacity of contextual factors in their teaching process. Language learners are not ergodic ensembles; thus, each EFL learner experiences the development of his or her goal-directed visions differently under the influence of contextual factors. EFL teachers might not be able to change the meso-systemic, exo-systemic, and macro-systemic factors influencing their learners' vision construction; however, they can play a pivotal role in their development of goal-directed visions within the microsystem of the classroom. For instance, they can focus on their teaching behavior, develop appropriate activities, apply proper materials, and involve their learners in their goals in the classroom.

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**Appendix A**
**Interview guide**
*1. Creating the vision*
1.1. Why do you want to learn English? ( the first session)
1.2. Do you have a vision of a successful language learner? ( the first session)
1.3 Could you come up with any vision for learning English, or new visions, in this session?
1.4. What factors in the classroom or outside the classroom help you in the creation of this vision?
1.5. Does learning English help you reach your future vision? (first session)
1.6. Did the classroom activities in this session help you find your vision accessible?
1.7. Have you ever imagined yourself in a future situation  as the result of your language learning experiences in this session?
1.8. Is your generated vision in accordance with your current situation?
1.9. Are you under the influence of your internal motivation or external forces in the construction of your visions?
*2. Strengthening the vision*
2.1 Is your generated future L2 vision vivid and clear to you?
2.2 Have you ever tried to make your vision more elaborated to yourself?
2.3. Did the activities in this session help to clarify the vision for yourself? If yes, what?
2.3 Have you ever tried to play the role of a person that you want to become in the future?
2.4. What factors in the classroom or outside the classroom helped you in making your vision clear and vivid?
*3. Making the vision plausible*
3.1 Was your future vision in this session reasonable and plausible to you?
3.2 According to your current situation, is your vision attainable to you?
3.3 At the time of generating your future vision, did you consider your current situation?
3.4 Is there any incongruity between what you are now and what you want to become in the future?
3.5. What factors in the classroom or outside the classroom helped you in the plausibility of your vision?
*4. Transforming the vision into action*
4.1 Could you transform your vision into reality in this session? If yes, how?

4.2 What strategies did you use in reaching your favorable vision?

4.3 Do you follow a general road map in the visions you have made?

4.4. What factors in the classroom or outside the classroom helped you in the transformation of your vision into reality?

4.5. Are the strategies and plans that you used to activate your vision in accordance with what you want to achieve?

*5. Keeping the vision alive*

5.1 What do you do for sustaining your motivation?

5.2 What did you do for keeping your vision alive in this session?

5.3. What factors in the classroom or outside the classroom helped you in making your vision clear and vivid?

*6. Counterbalancing the vision*

6.1 Have you ever thought about the situation that you might not be able to achieve your directed vision?

6.2 At the time of generating your future vision, have you considered the situation of not achieving your vision?

6.3 What would you do if you do not achieve what you have envisioned?

6.4 What do you do to avoid not achieving your vision?


**Appendix B**

**Learning journal framework**

1. Were the activities in this session useful for you to generate a vision of a successful language learner?

2. What kinds of activities have been carried out in this session that helped you to become closer to your future L2 vision?

3. What strategies did your teacher do in strengthening the vision of a successful language learner?

4. Were the activities effective in improving your motivation in reaching the generated vision?

5. What strategies did your teacher do in keeping the generated vision alive?