

# Both Positive and Negative Responses Show That Firth and Wagner (1997) Have a Point

Talal Musaed Alghizzi, Ph.D. Candidate

=====

Language in India [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com) ISSN 1930-2940 Vol. 13:5 May 2013

=====

## Abstract

Firth and Wagner (1997) “claim that methodologies, theories, and foci within SLA reflect an imbalance between cognitive and mentalistic orientations, and social and contextual orientations to language, the former being unquestionably in the ascendancy” (p. 757). This view has led to problematic perspectives on “discourse and communication” in the sense that studies there are, to a larger extent, in formal settings: classrooms, and “idealized native speaker(s) (NS) while viewing L2 learners; (NNS), as “deficient communicator(s) (ibid). Moreover, there is the fact that their recorded conversations are analyzed at “etic (levels) [i.e., analyst-relevant] (rather than at) emic (ones) [i.e., participant-relevant]” (p.760). Therefore, after discussing and reanalyzing the data of some prominent studies in SLA, they call for a whole “reconceptualization” of the SLA field’s methodologies, empirical parameters and theories to account for other contexts, participants, and different types of data analysis (p. 768).

This paper discusses the controversy and comes to the conclusion that both positive and negative responses show that Firth and Wagner (1997) have a point.

## Multiple Theories on Second Language Acquisition

Second language acquisition (SLA), considered one of the most fertile areas of linguistic investigation, offers theorists the opportunity to provide theories on the

Language in India [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com) ISSN 1930-2940 13:5 May 2013

Talal Musaed Alghizzi, Ph.D. Candidate

Both Positive and Negative Responses Show That Firth and Wagner (1997) Have a Point

mechanisms and processes by which non-native speakers learn target languages. This field has always been contentious, an arena for competing modifications, elaborations, and criticisms by professional linguists and other interested parties. For example, in McLaughlin's (1987) book, *Theories of Second Language Learning*, he discusses five of the most influential theories in SLA: viz., the monitor model, interlanguage theory, linguistic universal, acculturation/pidginization theory, and cognitive theory. He maintains that there are four requirements for a viable theory: "(1)...definitional precision and explanatory power, (2)...consisten(cy) with what is currently known, (3)...heuristical... rich(ness) in...predictions, and (4) falsifiab(ility)" (p.55); however, he finds the five above-mentioned theories unsuccessful because they do not fulfill all of these requirements equally.

### **Views from Other Related Fields**

McLaughlin's criticism has stimulated the enthusiasm of specialists from other fields, such as sociology, to elaborate on what they claim are problems in SLA theories and studies. For example, Firth and Wagner's (1997) article: "On Discourse, Communication, and (some) Fundamental Concepts in SLA Research"- which will be the focus of my discussion afterwards- has "had an impact on SLA theory, empirical research, and praxis over the last 10 years" (Lafford, 2007, p. 735). The article occasioned many disputes and responses in SLA between two groups: those who believe that acquisition of second language (L2) is "an individual cognitive process" located in the mind and others, who see it as "a social process, whereby learners acquire a target language (by means of) interactions with (native) speakers" (ibid).

### **On Firth and Wagner's Claim**

F&W “claim that methodologies, theories, and foci within SLA reflect an imbalance between cognitive and mentalistic orientations, and social and contextual orientations to language, the former being unquestionably in the ascendancy” (p. 757). This view has led to problematic perspectives on “discourse and communication” in the sense that studies there are, to a larger extent, in formal settings: classrooms, and “idealized native speaker(s) (NS) while viewing L2 learners; (NNS), as “deficient communicator(s) (ibid). Moreover, there is the fact that their recorded conversations are analyzed at “etic (levels) [i.e., analyst-relevant] (rather than at) emic (ones) [i.e., participant-relevant]” (p.760). Therefore, after discussing and reanalyzing the data of some prominent studies in SLA, they call for a whole “reconceptualization” of the SLA field’s methodologies, empirical parameters and theories to account for other contexts, participants, and different types of data analysis (p. 768).

### **Positive and Negative Responses**

As mentioned before, the article has received many responses. Those responses are categorized into two domains: positive, and negative. As regards the positive responses, they are either to state how beneficial the application of F&W’s suggestions has been in SLA field, or how they also have applications for other problems in that field. For example, when Swain and Deters (2007) reviewed and discussed a wide range of “sociocultural informed approaches to SLA research”, they were trying to show that by examining social factors of learners vis-à-vis the L2 learning processes, our understanding of these processes will be enhanced (p. 831).

For Liddicoat (1997), the SLA field has many problems. He states that inasmuch as the field has neglected the significance of social factors’ effects on

interactions - a concern shared by F&W - “the type of data frequently used for **Language in India** [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com) ISSN 1930-2940 13:5 May 2013

Talal Musaed Alghizzi, Ph.D. Candidate

Both Positive and Negative Responses Show That Firth and Wagner (1997) Have a Point

investigating questions of interaction in a L2 may not be adequate for determining what really occurs in such interactions”. He also maintains that not only does that field view “sentences” and “utterances” in participants’ conversations as “isolated, self-contained artifacts of language”, but also “actual instances of language” are excerpted from the “linguistic and nonlinguistic context in which they occur”. This has contradicted our perception of language as communication” (p. 313).

### **Importance of Psycholinguistic and Sociolinguistic Approaches**

In respect to the negative responses, many of them such as: (Poulisse, 1997, Kasper, 1997, and Gass, 1998), are written as reactions to the severe criticisms their previous work received in F&W’s article, and how the latter has supported their claims. Nonetheless, since the purpose of these responses is similar, I will discuss only two of them. According to Poulisse (1997), the application of both psycholinguistic and sociolinguistic approaches is very “important”. The reason is that “acquisition”, “learning”, “production”, and “perception” of L2s are considered as “psychological processes”, which justifies SLA’s researchers’ adoption of the former approach over the latter (p. 324). However, she believes this field can be expanded by investigating contextual factors such as: “language situation (L2 vs. FL), teaching methodologies,...etc.”, which “may influence these processes” (ibid).

Furthermore, she commented on F&W statement that:

The imposition of an orthodox social psychological hegemony on SLA has had the effect of reducing social identities to “subjects”, or at best to a binary distinction between natives and non-natives/learners. It gives preeminence to the research practice of coding, quantifying data, and

replicating results. It prioritizes explanations of phenomena in terms of underlying cognitive processes over descriptions of phenomena. It assigns preference to (researcher manipulation of) experimental settings rather than naturalistic ones. It endorses the search for the universal and underlying features of language processes rather than the particular and the local (p. 760)

### **Five Justifications**

First, “coding systems” and “quantifying data” are very important in any research to make its outcomes “concrete” and generalizable. Coding requires researchers to examine and explain “relevant features of the data” while quantification helps to provide “an empirical validation of the categories distinguished”. Second, “replication” is vital to make any research reliable. However, it requires three things: viz., describing “procedures” accurately, defining the “coding system”, and presenting “results” adequately (p. 325). Third, “explanations should...be prioritized over description” because they help researchers examine “theories” that can explicate their hypotheses about their predicted “phenomena” (ibid).

In addition, as much as experimental research - even with the researchers’ manipulation of the factor of their interests - “can contribute to both psycholinguistic and sociolinguistic” studies, they have to be supplemented by “naturalistic” ones. Yet, when the researcher has a “theory” which contains certain “hypotheses”, “experiments” are not merely to examine them, but to allow him/her to “control contextual and situational dimensions that so often blur the results of naturalistic research” (p. 325). Finally, the task of any researcher, – regardless of their “research

paradigm” -, is to evolve “theories” explicating “as many features of language processes as possible” and not vice versa (ibid).

### **Limited Focus**

With respect to CS studies, Poulisse (1997) agrees with F&W on their observation that researchers have an interest in analyzing only L2 learners’ “linguistic deficiencies and communicative problems” (p.760). Nevertheless, this does not indicate that their language is “full of problems” nor does it imply that their speech is “inferior to L1(s’)” (p. 326). Actually, she justifies this interest by saying that these kinds of problems are significant because they frequently occur in NNSs speech and are successfully solved by some strategies employed by L2 learners themselves. She contends that when researchers identify CS, defined by Faerch and Kasper (1983, p. 36) as “potentially conscious plans for solving what, to an individual, presents itself as a problem in reaching a particular communicative goal” (as cited in Firth and Wagner 1997, p. 360-361), and “compensatory strategies” – aimed at CS accomplishment - which is defined as “processes...which are adopted by language users [...not just learners] in the creation of alternative means of expression when linguistic shortcomings make it impossible for them to communicate their intended meaning in the preferred manner” (Poulisse, 1990, p. 193, as cited in Poulisse, 1997, p. 325), they are focusing on what is primarily an SLA field interest.

Most importantly, she assures that F&W’s comment on her CS study: (Poulisse and Bongaert, 1990), that “the FL speaker’s anomalous word formations [actually Dutch L1 lexical items] are viewed as erroneous features, explained solely in terms of the individual’s lack of lexical competence [through the concept of “automatic transfer”] (instead of) in terms of interactional or sociolinguistic factors”

**Language in India** [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com) ISSN 1930-2940 13:5 May 2013

Talal Musaed Alghizzi, Ph.D. Candidate

Both Positive and Negative Responses Show That Firth and Wagner (1997) Have a Point

(p. 761), is pure misinterpretation. The reasons are not that the study tackled “several types of transfer... CS [as defined above] and automatic transfer” which is identified - in another study - to have similarities to “slips of the tongue”, nor the confusion in understanding the differences between them by F&W. It is that they, Poulishse & Bongaert, have described “CS in psycholinguistic terms...and explained the use of particular types of CS in terms of general communicative principles, referring to contextual factors influencing the operation of these principles” (p.326).

### **Discussion of Input Modification Studies**

F&W discuss some of the “input modification studies” in which reported differences in conversations between NS with NS, and NS with NNS noted the latter as having “more clarification requests, repetitions, expansions, and elaborations, and a greater incidence of transparency” (Varonis and Gass, 1985b, as cited in Firth and Wagner, 1997, p. 763). However, they think these differences are because of NNSs not knowing the conversation principles, or the “rules of the game”. Poulishse, though, adduces that the purpose of the studies F&W examined was to clarify that “following the rules of the game results in more repetitions, requests for confirmation, comprehension checks,...etc.”, in conversations including NNS than “ in interactions only involving NSs” (p.327). Finally, she states that comparing the language proficiency of NNSs with NSs’ - which F&W maintain is wrong - is very important, especially if the studies conducted in SLA are cross-sectional.

Likewise, Gass (1998) wrote an article refuting the criticisms of F&W in her work: (Varonis & Gass, 1985a, 1985b). She tries to clarify not only the misuse of her work and others, which made her doubt the significance and usefulness of F&W contribution to the field of SLA, but also cites examples and quotations in the F&W’s **Language in India** [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com) ISSN 1930-2940 13:5 May 2013  
Talal Musaed Alghizzi, Ph.D. Candidate  
Both Positive and Negative Responses Show That Firth and Wagner (1997) Have a Point

article showing that their critiques are based on confusion about the interpretation of SLA researchers' studies and concepts.

The SLA field has many goals, one of which is input/interaction frame-work. The problem here is that F&W took a study of this type: (Varonis & Gass, 1985b), and categorize it as accounting for “interactional and sociolinguistic dimensions of language” which “obviates insight into the nature of language, most centrally the language use of second or foreign language (S/FL) speakers” (p. 757). Nonetheless, in fact - as Gass (1998) states - it is to investigate “what kinds of interaction might bring about what types of changes in linguistic knowledge...rather than understand(ing) language per se” (p.84).

### **Considering Language in Context**

Also, although Gass admits that examining “these changes” requires “consider(ing) language use in context”, this is “trivial” because the focus of this type of study is on “the language used and not on the act of communication” (ibid). In addition, she maintains that F&W had a problem in differentiating between “learners” and “users”. That is observable in F&W’s statement: “although S/FL interactions occurring in non-instructional settings are everyday occurrences [e.g., in the workplace], they have not, as yet, attracted the attention of SLA researchers”(p.758). Nevertheless, Gass believes that this is “part of a boarder field...(where) SLA (in itself) is a subset”. Moreover, the L2 speakers who take part in most SLA research need to be “learners” because otherwise they will not show “change(s) in (their) grammatical systems” (P. 84). Finally, she explains that F&W’s comment on her work: (Varonis & Gass, 1985a), that subjects there, though not learners, were “cast in



the same light” (p. 764), is false since all participants were students at the “English Language Institute, University of Michigan” (p. 85).

### **Type Participants**

The second problem Gass (1998) examines is related to the type of participants: (NS & NNS), chosen in SLA research. F&W state that, in that field, there are idealizations of native speakers while nonnative speakers are viewed as “defective communicator(s), handicapped by...underdeveloped communicative competence(s)”, and Liddicoat agrees that such idealizations exist. They also believe that the term used to describe the two participants indicates a superior-inferior relationship (i.e., “non” in nonnative speaker). Even worse, the conversations taking place between NSs and NNSs are viewed as “problematic”, in the sense that they are “prejudged to be somehow unusual, anomalous, or extraordinary” (p. 764). Furthermore, they question the implications that homogeneity has in NS & NNS groups, in the sense that the term NS does not include true bilinguals and other social identities such as: “Father, man, friend,...etc.” (p. 764), which are worth investigating. In this matter, Long (1997) agrees with F&W. Finally, F&W maintain that one SLA studies problem is that the “baseline data” are taken from NSs’ interactions since they are considered the best source of the target language “norm(s)” (p.763).

### **“Handicapped in Conversation”**

In rebuttal, Gass (1998) contends that in the SLA field - and especially in studies within the frame work she applied - NS and NNS are equally viewed as “handicapped in conversation”. She maintains that the quotation cited in F&W’s

article (p. 757): “native speakers and nonnative speakers are multiply handicapped in conversation with one another” (Varonis & Gass, 1985b, p. 340) is misinterpreted. In that particular work, it was clarified that they were not favoring “one group over the other”, but rather “because the fault of non-understanding may reside with either the speaker or the hearer or both, the interlocutors have a shared incompetence” (p. 71, as cited in Gass, 1998, p. 85). She also states that the same way “correct forms” (Corder, 1967, Selinker, 1972, as cited *ibid*) can provide” insights into the nature of linguistic systems...of learners,...deficiencies” can, too (Gass, 1998, p. 85). While Gass agrees with F&W with respect to the need for precise terms in SLA field, she considers inferring any preferential status relationship between the two terms NS& NNS as “a leap in logic” (*ibid*).

As regards F&W’s opinion that conversation between NSs and NNSs is viewed as “problematic...”, Gass maintains that if they were referring to “frequency,” then conversations are not uncommon because they occur everywhere. “However, frequency has little or nothing to do with problematcity (because) they can be problematic even while being frequent” (p. 85). Although Gass concedes that the term NS is “problematic” because it ignores “bilingualisms or multilingualism”, the latter are “excluded because some of these issues are unresolved” in SLA field (p. 86). But, when it comes to the other social identities which F&W endorsed, it is impossible to include them because they are irrelevant to research questions which investigate “how L2s is acquired, and what the nature of learner systems is”. Nevertheless, Block (2007) refutes this by mentioning some of the studies that were conducted on the basis of such an assumption; i.e., there is a correlation between identity and L2 learning. Finally, Gass (1998) comments on F&W’s last point, that NSs are the norms of

comparison, by saying that generally both NS and NNS are involved in learning; however, one has reached total fluency, whereas the other has not. Therefore, the comparison makes a perfect sense. On the other hand, Long (1997) believes that the base line should be extracted from different types of “dyads”; (i.e., NS-NS, NS-NNS, and NNS-NNS), so that the researcher in SLA can “make more than purely impressionistic claims about certain linguistic or conversational modifications attributable to one speaker in a dyad” (p. 320).

### **Purpose for Writing Short Paragraphs**

Upon consideration, I have to admit that the purpose for writing short paragraphs on the positive responses on Firth and Wagner’s (1997) article, while discussing thoroughly the major points presented in the counter-arguments, is to show that even with the latters’ claims that F&W’s suggestions are based on misinterpretations and confusion of SLA studies and probably its concepts, their other justifications of, for example, viewing NNSs’ conversations as problematic, or making the base line of comparison from NSs only, is supported/refuted by other researchers. This is an indication that everyone has the right to say what he/she thinks are weaknesses/strengths in SLA field as long as they are supported by concrete evidence. It is by doing so that field will be enhanced and help us to know - hopefully exactly - what are the processes of L2 learners. This will aid linguists in developing perfect teaching methodologies that will make acquiring a second language seem as easy and as natural as learning one’s mother tongue.

Finally, I totally agree with F&W’s suggestions and general reservations as regards the SLA field and I think they are acceptable. The reason is that, within this field most researchers ignore the importance of social factors, other social identities, **Language in India** [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com) ISSN 1930-2940 13:5 May 2013  
Talal Musaed Alghizzi, Ph.D. Candidate  
Both Positive and Negative Responses Show That Firth and Wagner (1997) Have a Point

and participant-sensitive analysis in their primary data. It could be that by including these, our understanding of L2 learners' cognitive processes will increase. Therefore, Block (2006) suggests that while accounting for the aforementioned points, SLA researchers should investigate L2 users/learners' identities from "two perspectives": "social class (and) psychoanalytical theory" (P. 872). Having said that, and as Long (1997, p. 322) states, "F&W need to show us how they plan to deal with some obvious methodological problems in the kind of research they propose, namely, the representativeness, verifiability, and relevance to theory of examples cited and of analyses, however detailed and careful, of isolated, "local, particular events".

## References

- Block, D. (2007). The rise of identity in SLA research, post Firth and Wagner (1997). *The Modern Language Journal*, Focus Issue 91, 863-876. Retrieved from <http://0-www.jstor.org.library.ucc.ie/stable/pdfplus/4626137.pdf>
- Firth, A., & Wagner, J. (1997/2007). On discourse, communication, and (some) fundamental concept in SLA research. *The Modern Language Journal*, Focus Issue 91, 757-772. Retrived from <http://0-www.jstor.org.library.ucc.ie/stable/pdfplus/4626130.pdf>
- Gass, S. (1998). Apples and oranges: Or why apples are not oranges and don't need to be a response to Firth and Wagner. *The Modern Language Journal*, 82/i, 83-90. Retrieved from <http://0-www.jstor.org.library.ucc.ie/stable/pdfplus/328685.pdf?acceptTC=true>
- Kasper, G. (1997). "A" stands for Acquisition: A response to Firth and Wagner. *The Modern Language Journal*, 81/iii, 307-312. Retrieved from <http://0-www.jstor.org.library.ucc.ie/stable/pdfplus/329304.pdf>

**Language in India** [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com) ISSN 1930-2940 13:5 May 2013

Talal Musaed Alghizzi, Ph.D. Candidate

Both Positive and Negative Responses Show That Firth and Wagner (1997) Have a Point

Lafford, B. (2007). Second language acquisition reconceptualized? The impact of Firth and Wagner (1997). *The Modern Language Journal*, Focus Issue 91, 735-756. Retrieved from <http://0-www.jstor.org.library.ucc.ie/stable/pdfplus/4626129.pdf> [Accessed 26 Oct., 2011].

Liddicoat, A. (1997). Interaction, social structure, and second language use: A response to Firth and Wagner. *The Modern Language Journal*, 81/ iii, 313-317. Retrieved from <http://0-www.jstor.org.library.ucc.ie/stable/pdfplus/329305.pdf>

Long, M. (1997). Construct validity in SLA research: A response to Firth and Wagner. *The Modern Language Journal*, 81/iii, 318-223. Retrieved from <http://0-www.jstor.org.library.ucc.ie/stable/pdfplus/329306.pdf>

McLaughlin, B. (1987). *Theories of second language learning*. London: Edward Arnold (Publishers) Ltd.

Poulisse, N. (1997). Some words in defense of the psycholinguistic approach: A response to Firth and Wagner. *The Modern Language Journal*, 81/iii, 324-328. Retrieved from <http://0-www.jstor.org.library.ucc.ie/stable/pdfplus/329307.pdf>

Swain, M., Deters, P. (2007). “New” mainstream SLA theory: Expanded and Enriched. *The Modern Language Journal*, Focus Issue 91, 820-836. Retrieved from <http://0-www.jstor.org.library.ucc.ie/stable/pdfplus/4626134.pdf>

=====

Talal Musaед Alghizzi  
(Ph.D. Candidate at the University College, Cork, Ireland)  
Imam Muhammad Ibn Saudi Islamic University  
College of Languages and Translation  
Riyadh  
Saudi Arabia  
[t-althizzie@hotmail.com](mailto:t-althizzie@hotmail.com)

**Language in India** [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com) ISSN 1930-2940 13:5 May 2013

Talal Musaед Alghizzi, Ph.D. Candidate

Both Positive and Negative Responses Show That Firth and Wagner (1997) Have a Point