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The Dominance of Gap-Spotting in Iranian Applied Linguistics Research: Epistemological Orientations and Knowledge Production

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Abstract

Formulating well-defined research questions is widely regarded as fundamental to applied linguistics research. A common strategy for doing so is gap-spotting, whereby researchers justify their studies by identifying and filling gaps in the existing literature. This study examines how this strategy is employed in empirical research articles published in ISC-indexed (and/or Scopus-indexed) Iranian applied linguistics journals. Drawing on a qualitative content analysis of a random sample ($n = 210$) of research articles published between 2016 and 2024, the study investigates the prevalence of gap-spotting, the ways different types of research gaps function in scholarly argumentation, and how researchers orient knowledge production. The analysis reveals that, despite disciplinary and paradigmatic diversity, most articles rely heavily on gap-spotting to establish significance and formulate research questions, with knowledge gaps dominating (81%) and methodological or theoretical concerns relegated to auxiliary roles. This pattern orients knowledge production toward incremental accumulation, pedagogical effectiveness and validation, situating research within a largely confirmatory, accumulation-oriented epistemology that operates within established theoretical and instructional paradigms rather than critically interrogating their underlying assumptions. The findings highlight an urgent need to diversify research question formulation through problematization, rhizomatic reviews, and critical engagement with underlying assumptions to foster a more pluralistic and socially responsive research culture.

Keywords: applied linguistics, epistemology, gap-spotting, knowledge production, research questions

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1. Introduction

Formulating research questions is widely regarded as one of the most challenging yet consequential stages of any research project. Research questions not only delineate the scope of inquiry but also guide decisions about data collection, methodological design, and analysis (Mackey & Gass, 2016; Sunderland, 2010). For this reason, they are often described as the foundation of research (Blaikie, 2000). Some scholars even suggest that identifying the “right” research questions is more valuable than producing answers (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2013; Bacchi, 2009). In line with this perspective, Mackey and Gass (2016), for instance, identify several sources of inspiration, including observing linguistic phenomena, building on suggestions for future research, extensive reading, and reviewing prior studies to identify researchable gaps. In applied linguistics, where research spans issues such as language learning, pedagogy, use, and policy, well-formulated questions are expected to be theoretically relevant, clear and unambiguous, feasible, and capable of producing insights that advance the field (Dörnyei, 2007; Mackey & Gass, 2016).

Among these strategies, gap-spotting has become the most conventional and institutionally sanctioned way of formulating research questions across many academic disciplines, including applied linguistics (Chatterjee & Davison, 2020; Hempel et al., 2019; Nyanchoka et al., 2019; Razavipour & Farzaneh, 2025; Robinson et al., 2011; Sandberg & Alvesson, 2011; Wald et al., 2024). Gap-spotting involves identifying an absence, limitation, or underexplored area in prior research and positioning the proposed study as a means of filling that gap (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2013; Sandberg & Alvesson, 2011). Although this strategy is often treated as a neutral indicator of originality (Chatterjee & Davison, 2020; Sandberg & Alvesson, 2011; Wald et al., 2024), a growing body of scholarship has raised concerns about the epistemological consequences of its routine and unreflective use (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2013; Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009; Chatterjee & Davison, 2020; Razavipour & Farzaneh, 2025; St. Pierre, 2016). Alvesson and Sandberg (2013) contend that when gap-spotting becomes the default mode of inquiry, it tends to encourage cumulative extensions of existing knowledge rather than more critical, reflexive, or assumption-challenging forms of research. Under such conditions, gap-spotting may function less as a genuine heuristic for innovation and more as a stabilizing rhetorical convention that reproduces dominant theoretical frameworks, research agendas, and methodological norms (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2013; Razavipour & Farzaneh, 2025; St. Pierre, 2016; Wald et al., 2024).

In light of its widespread use, the present study interrogates how gap-spotting operates in applied linguistics research in practice, examining how gap statements are constructed, how different types of gaps are mobilized

rhetorically, and how these practices shape orientations to knowledge production, particularly within the Iranian context. Analyzing research articles from Iranian applied linguistics journals, the originality of the study stems from providing a systematic, empirical analysis of this routine academic practice within a semi-peripheral research context, where norms and pressures may intensify reliance on such strategies. By highlighting the framing and justification of research questions, the study contributes to applied linguistics debates on knowledge production, epistemological orientation, and dominant research paradigms. Specifically, it explores if gap-spotting predominantly supports incremental inquiry or also accommodates more critical and innovative engagements. The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How and to what extent is gap-spotting employed to frame and justify research questions in empirical articles published in Iranian applied linguistics journals?
2. How are different types of research gaps articulated in empirical articles published in Iranian applied linguistics journals?
3. What do these articulations reveal about the underlying epistemological commitments?

2. Literature Review

2.1. The Construction of Research Questions Across Methodological, Rhetorical, and Disciplinary Perspectives

A growing body of scholarship in research methodology has examined the construction of research questions (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2013; Coombe, 2021; Jacobs, 2011; Swales, 2004). Of these contributions, Alvesson and Sandberg (2013) stand out for identifying four main categories of research question development: gap-spotting, problematization, critical confrontation, and new idea generation. According to these authors, gap-spotting is the most common, whereby researchers identify deficiencies in existing research and design studies to address them. Problematization, by contrast, involves challenging taken-for-granted assumptions in order to reframe inquiry. In their framework, critical confrontation highlights limitations in existing theories, while the “new idea” approach emphasizes originality without explicit reliance on prior literature.

The formulation of research questions extends beyond methodological design to include rhetorical positioning within disciplinary communities and adherence to the writing conventions emphasized in genre-informed approaches to English for Academic Purposes (EAP). The IMRD (Introduction, Methods, Results, Discussion) structure provides a macro-level organizational framework, while Swales’s (1990) Create a Research Space

(CARS) model demonstrates how research article introductions establish a territory, create a niche, and occupy that niche. In this framework, identifying a gap serves as a key rhetorical move for justifying research. In his 2004 revision, Swales consolidated niche-establishing strategies into two main options: indicating a gap and adding to what is known.

The development of research questions also reflects disciplinary epistemic priorities, as seen in the natural sciences' typical focus on explaining observable phenomena, testing hypotheses, and generating models (Arias & Lee, 2026), while social sciences questions commonly interpret human behavior, social interaction, and societal issues (Van der Walddt, 2025). These disciplinary orientations shape not only what is studied but also how inquiry is framed and justified. Despite such epistemic variation and the availability of alternative strategies, empirical research across disciplines consistently demonstrates a striking convergence towards gap-spotting. In organizational studies, Sandberg and Alvesson (2011) identified gap-spotting as the most common strategy, distinguishing three modes: confusion spotting, neglect spotting, and application spotting. In management information systems (MIS), Chatterjee and Davison (2020) report that gap-spotting dominates research question construction, with alternative strategies such as problematization rarely employed. In health sciences, gap-spotting also prevails, especially through systematic reviews designed to identify gaps in evidence (Hempel et al., 2019; Nyanchoka et al., 2019; Robinson et al., 2011). In education, Wald et al. (2024) show that higher education researchers justify their studies mainly through claims of gaps in the literature. Building on Jacobs's (2011) classification of research problems and Müller-Bloch and Kranz's (2015) framework, they develop a typology of six types of research gaps: evidence, knowledge, practice, methodological, evaluation, and theoretical (Table 1).

Table 1

A Typology of Research Gaps

Gaps	Definitions
Evidence Gap	Results from studies allow for conclusions in their own right, but are inconsistent when examined from a different point of view.
Knowledge Gap	Research findings do not exist or are lacking in the literature.
Practice Gap	Professional behaviour or practices either deviate from research findings, are not covered by research, or need to change and so require research.
Methodological Gap	A variation of research methods is necessary to generate new insights or to avoid distorted findings.
Evaluation Gap	Research findings or propositions need to be evaluated or empirically verified.
Theoretical Gap	Theory should be applied to certain research issues to generate new insights, or should be developed for explaining a phenomenon.

Note. Adapted From Wald et al. (2024), p. 312

2.2. Research Questions and Gap Statements in Applied Linguistics

Literature on the topic in applied linguistics has mostly focused on the characteristics of research questions. For example, Dörnyei (2007) underscores that good research questions strike a balance between innovation and practicality, while Mackey and Gass (2016) detail how research questions in second language acquisition must anticipate methodological constraints and ethical considerations. Coombe (2021) further argues that well-formulated questions help establish the relevance of a study within broader disciplinary debates. Together, these contributions provide an applied framework for evaluating what makes a research question effective, though they approach the issue largely from pedagogical and methodological perspectives.

Genre-based investigations have further examined how research questions are rhetorically positioned in the introduction sections of applied linguistics articles, particularly in Move 3, where the niche of the study is typically established (Moreno & Swales, 2018). In this move, research questions are closely tied to gap-indicating strategies central to the CARS model, functioning to transform identified gaps into researchable problems. Ozturk (2007) found that the explicit articulation of research questions varies across international and local journals, with international outlets tending to foreground them more consistently. Sheldon (2011) extended this line of inquiry by showing how authors' disciplinary and cultural backgrounds shape the explicitness and formality with which research questions are presented in introductions. These studies suggest that the placement of research questions in Move 3 not only reflects a conventional genre structure but also reveals underlying disciplinary norms and expectations.

Focusing on the distributional and syntactical aspects of research questions, Lim (2014) analyzed the linguistic realization of research questions in applied linguistics and related fields, noting patterns in their grammatical forms, including interrogatives, declaratives, and nominalizations. More recently, Ghanbar and Rezvani (2023) investigated the syntactic structures of research questions across a corpus of applied linguistics articles, finding systematic preferences for certain forms such as "to what extent" questions, that align with empirical methodologies favored in the field. Such work shows that research questions can be shaped by disciplinary discourse practices.

Research questions' formal qualities, functions, and roles in guiding research design aside, the only field-level, corpus-based investigation that explicitly addresses how applied linguistics researchers formulate research questions in practice is Razavipour and Farzaneh (2025). Employing a qualitative content analysis of original research articles published in top-tier

international applied linguistics journals, their study demonstrates that an overwhelming majority of articles rely on gap-spotting as the primary strategy for formulating researchable questions and legitimizing their scholarly contribution. They also conclude that the tendency to focus on identifying research gaps encourages incremental contributions, fosters a mindset of merely adding to existing literature, and can lead to an occasional narrowing of vision in research.

Taken together, the literature demonstrates that research questions occupy a central methodological and rhetorical role across disciplines, with gap-spotting emerging as a dominant and largely taken-for-granted strategy for legitimizing research. Rather than positioning this dominance as a deficiency to be remedied, the present study approaches it as an object of inquiry in its own right, asking what it means for a discipline to habitually construct research significance through claims of absence, insufficiency, or lack.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a corpus-based qualitative content analysis to examine how applied linguistics researchers formulate research questions through gap-spotting. A narrative review is particularly suited to this inquiry as it allows for a broad, critical exploration of disciplinary practices, while qualitative content analysis enables systematic examination of textual features in published articles (Dörnyei, 2007). The unit of analysis is the research article, with particular analytical attention devoted to research question statements and the preceding textual segments in which gaps are constructed and justified.

3.1. Corpus Selection

The corpus comprises empirical research articles published between 2016 and 2024 in 12 Iranian applied linguistics journals (see Table 2 for details). All journals are published in English and are indexed in Scopus and/or ranked in ISC and approved by Iran's Ministry of Science, Research, and Technology, ensuring their recognized scholarly status within the field. The time frame (2016–2024) was selected to capture contemporary research practices during a period in which gap-spotting has been empirically documented as the dominant strategy for research question construction across disciplines and, more recently, in applied linguistics.

Table 2*Descriptive Information of the Journals in the Sample*

Journal Title	Publisher	Start year	Frequency	No. of articles
Applied Research on English Language (AREL)	University of Isfahan	2012	Quarterly	19
Iranian Journal of Applied Linguistics (IJAL)	Kharazmi University	2002	Semiannual	7
Iranian Journal of Applied Language Studies (IJALS)	University of Sistan and Baluchestan	2009	Semiannual	6
Iranian Journal of English for Academic Purposes (IJEAP)	Chabahar Maritime University	2015	Quarterly	32
Iranian Journal of Language Teaching Research (IJLTR)	Urmia University	2013	3 Times a Year	17
Issues in Language Teaching (ILT)	Allameh Tabataba'i University	2012	Semiannual	8
Journal of English Language Teaching and Learning (JELTL)	University of Tabriz	2009	Semiannual	31
Journal of Language Horizons (JLH)	Alzahra University	2017	Quarterly	14
Journal of Modern Research in English Language Studies (JMRELS)	Imam Khomeini International University	2014	Quarterly	4
Journal of Research in Applied Linguistics (RALs)	Shahid Chamran University of Ahvaz	2010	Semiannual	34
Journal of Teaching English Language (TEL)	TELLSI	2007	Semiannual	24
Teaching English as a Second Language Quarterly (TESLQ)	Shiraz University	1981	Quarterly	14

Only empirical research articles were included in order to focus on original research contributions in which research questions play a central structuring role; review, theoretical, opinion articles and commentaries were thus excluded. This yielded an initial pool of 630 articles. The articles were first grouped by journal, with the journals arranged in random order. Within each journal, articles were sorted chronologically by publication date and then assigned sequential numbers from 1 to 630. Selecting every third article produced a final corpus of 210 (the distribution across journals is reported in Table 2). The uniform interval across the frame ensured each journal contributed roughly in proportion to its population share, preserving both disciplinary and temporal representativeness. The systematic selection generated a sample which was also analytically manageable for in-depth qualitative analysis while remaining large enough to capture the full range of research practices across the journals.

Overall, the resulting corpus represents substantial disciplinary and paradigmatic diversity. At the disciplinary level, the articles span a wide range of subfields and research domains within applied linguistics, including language teaching and pedagogy, second language acquisition,

assessment and testing, discourse analysis, pragmatics, sociolinguistics, curriculum and materials development, teacher education, and educational psychology–informed research. At the paradigmatic level, the corpus reflects variation in epistemological and methodological orientations, encompassing quantitative (positivist or post-positivist), qualitative (interpretive or constructivist), mixed-methods, and critical or sociocultural approaches, as well as experimental and classroom-based designs. The sample includes 89 qualitative, 65 mixed-methods, and 56 quantitative studies. Paradigmatic diversity thus captures differences not only in methods but also in underlying assumptions about what counts as knowledge, evidence, and explanation.

3.2. Data Analysis

A qualitative interpretive analysis was undertaken to understand how research gaps are discursively constructed and mobilized to justify research questions. The study employed a theoretically informed analytical framework that functioned as a sensitizing lens through which instances of gap-spotting were examined in context. This approach aligns with interpretive traditions of qualitative content analysis in which analytical categories guide attention without reducing textual phenomena to mechanically coded units. To support the study's interpretation, Table 3 was developed as an analytically reconfigured framework of research gaps. Building on the classification proposed by Wald et al. (2024) and informed by the broader literature on research question formulation and gap-spotting (e.g., Alvesson & Sandberg, 2013; Jacobs, 2011; Müller-Bloch & Kranz, 2015), the table retains the original gap categories while rearticulating each type in relation to its rhetorical function in research justification and its epistemological orientation. In this way, the framework served as a conceptual matrix for interpreting how different types of gaps function discursively to construct significance and orient claims to contribution. More specifically, each article in the sample was read holistically to preserve rhetorical and argumentative coherence. Analytical attention focused on (a) explicit and implicit statements of insufficiency, absence, limitation, contradiction, or need, and (b) surrounding textual segments where such statements were rhetorically elaborated to position the study's contribution. Extracted excerpts were interpreted in relation to the broader argumentative structure of the article, particularly the transition from literature review to research question formulation.

Table 3*An Analytical Framework of Research Gaps and Their Primary Functions*

Type of Gap	Primary Function in Research Justification
Evidence Gap	Highlights inconsistencies or contradictions across existing findings, often to warrant further empirical testing or clarification.
Knowledge Gap	Justifies research by claiming the absence or insufficiency of prior studies on a particular topic or phenomenon.
Practice Gap	Connects research to discrepancies between professional practice and research-based knowledge, or to undocumented practices.
Methodological Gap	Legitimizes research by proposing alternative, complementary, or improved methodological approaches.
Evaluation Gap	Motivates research aimed at assessing, validating, or empirically testing existing models, frameworks, or propositions.
Theoretical Gap	Frames research as extending, refining, or applying theory to explain phenomena or generate new insights.

The interpretive process involved grouping, comparing, and relating excerpts to trace recurring rhetorical and methodological patterns across the corpus. Rather than emphasizing frequency, the analysis focused on the forms and functions of gap-spotting as a disciplinary practice, examining how research problems are framed and contributions positioned within broader orientations toward knowledge production. Analytical interpretations were revisited iteratively in relation to both the empirical material and relevant scholarly debates, allowing sensitivity to contextual nuance while minimizing premature categorization. To establish consistency and enhance analytical credibility, both authors independently analyzed an initial sample of 25 articles. To refine interpretations and resolve discrepancies, we also engaged in reflexive dialogue through negotiated re-reading of the full textual context (Riazi et al., 2023). The sample was then analyzed by the authors.

4. Results and Discussion

The findings are presented in two subsections, mirroring the research aims and questions. The first subsection reports the extent to which research articles rely on identified gaps to construct research questions. The second subsection examines the types of research gaps identified in the corpus and their distribution patterns.

4.1. Results

4.1.1. Patterns of Gap-Based Research Question Construction

4.1.1.1. Prevalence and Configuration of Research Questions. Of the 210 articles analyzed, 22 articles (approximately 10%) did not include research questions, instead signaling research intentions through alternative formulations such as *aims*, *objectives*, *goals*, or *purposes*. The remaining 188 articles (around 90%) contained explicitly stated research questions. Within this group, the number of research questions ranged from one to eight. The

most common configuration was two research questions (79 articles, about 38%), followed by one research question (43 articles, about 20%) and three research questions (38 articles, approximately 18%). Seven articles contained between five and eight research questions; most of these were mixed-methods studies. (See Table 4)

Table 4

Distribution of Research Questions in the Analyzed Articles (N = 210)

Number of Research Questions	Number of Articles	Percentage (%)
No research questions	22	10
1 research question	43	20
2 research questions	79	38
3 research questions	38	18
4 research questions	21	10
5 research questions	3	
6 research questions	2	
7 research questions	1	4
8 research questions	1	
Total	210	100

4.1.1.2. Gap-Based Justification and Modes of Gap Articulation.

Out of the 188 articles with explicitly stated research questions, 169 (approximately 90%) relied on identifying gaps in prior research to construct their research questions. Within this gap-oriented group, articles employed both explicit and implicit strategies. (See Table 5)

Explicit gap statements directly invoked lexical items such as *gap*, *lacuna*, *void*, and *hiatus*. For example: "*There are more complicated power relationships in supervision in EFL contexts which ... have not yet been explored. Such being the case, the present study was an attempt to address this gap*" [11]; "*there has been paucity of research regarding the importance and linkage of language teaching experience ... and job performance among English teachers. Therefore, this study aims to fill up the lacuna*" [175]; "*no direct reference has been made to the possible impact of the teachers' discipline on their perceptions of assessment literacy (...). Accordingly, the current study benefitted from a mixed-methods design ... to fill this void*" [169]; "*To contribute to the existing body of research in the area of thematicity and genre analysis, the present study aimed to fill the aforesaid hiatus in the literature*" [83].

Implicit gap statements included claims that "*less is known about*" a particular topic [7], "*there are not enough*" studies on a topic [15], or that "*previous works have failed to address*" a specific issue [12]. Formulations

frequently invoked evaluative expressions such as "*paucity of research*" [131], "*a dearth of research*" 33, and framed topics as "*understudied*" [13], "*neglected*" [33], or an "*overlooked area*" [144]. In some cases, research gaps were justified by pointing to "*inconsistency of the findings*" in existing studies [79].

Implicit gap statements accounted for 86 articles (46%), while explicit gap formulations comprised 83 articles (44%).

Table 5

Distribution of Research-Gap Orientation and Gap-Articulation Strategies (N = 188)

Research-gap orientation / gap-articulation strategy	Number of articles	Percentage
No gap-based justification for research questions	19	10%
Gap-based justification for research questions (total)	169	90%
└ Implicit gap statements	86	46%
└ Explicit gap statements	83	44%

Note. Percentages are calculated based on the total number of articles containing explicitly stated research questions (N = 188). Implicit and explicit gap statements are subsets of gap-based justifications.

4.1.1.3. Sources of Research Gaps. In most cases, researchers drew on selective engagements with prior literature to claim that knowledge in a particular area is lacking. Typical formulations included assertions such "*As far as the researchers reviewed the related literature, there is no study to investigate*" the topic of interest [8], or claims that "*to the best of the present researchers' knowledge, almost no research has*" been conducted in a given area [46].

A smaller subset, that is, 19 out of 169 gap-oriented articles (approximately 10%), attributed gap identification to prior scholars. For example: "the lack of published accounts on evaluation processes in different contexts has been a commonly cited gap in the field (Liddicoat & Taylor-Leech, 2014)" [37]; "*EAP teacher learning is neglected as an area of research (Basturkmen, 2014)*" [33]. Only one article explicitly attributed a research gap to a systematic literature review [128].

4.1.1.4. Textual Positioning of Research Gaps. Research gaps were most typically introduced toward the end of the introduction and/or the literature review sections. In 41 articles (approximately 22%), the research gap was introduced in the abstract. Occasionally, research gaps were positioned in separate, explicitly labeled sections such as "Purpose of the Study" or "Research Questions."

4.1.2. Types of Research Gaps Identified in the Corpus

This subsection presents the types and distribution of research gaps identified in the corpus. (See Table 3 for the analytical framework of gap types)

4.1.2.1. Distribution of Gap Types. Of the 169 articles that formulated research questions through gap-spotting, knowledge gaps were the most frequently identified type, positioned as the primary justification in 137 articles (81%). Within this group, 42 articles (25%) relied exclusively on a knowledge gap. Evidence gaps served as the primary justification in 12 articles (7%), evaluation gaps in 6 articles (4%), practice gaps in 5 articles (3%), theoretical gaps in 5 articles (3%), and methodological gaps in 4 articles (2%).

4.1.2.2. Combinatory Patterns of Gap Types. Knowledge gaps were frequently combined with other gap types. In 45 articles (27%), a primary knowledge gap was supported by a secondary practice gap. In 25 articles (15%), a primary knowledge gap was reinforced by a secondary evidence gap. Other combinatory patterns included knowledge gaps supported by methodological gaps (12 articles, 7%) and knowledge gaps supported by evaluation gaps (9 articles, 5%) or theoretical gaps (7 articles, 4%). (See Table 6)

Table 6

Distribution and Combinatory Patterns of Research Gaps in Research Question Formulation (n = 169)

Gap Type	Primary Gap n (%)	Exclusive Primary n (%)	Secondary Gap n (%)	Supporting Primary Knowledge Gap n (%)
Knowledge Gap	137 (81%)	42 (25%)	19 (11%)	—
Evidence Gap	12 (7%)	1 (<1%)	25 (15%)	22 (13%)
Evaluation Gap	6 (4%)	1 (<1%)	11 (7%)	9 (5%)
Practice Gap	5 (3%)	1 (<1%)	46 (27%)	45 (27%)
Theoretical Gap	5 (3%)	1 (<1%)	7 (4%)	7 (4%)
Methodological Gap	4 (2%)	1 (<1%)	15 (9%)	12 (7%)

4.1.2.3. Articulation of Gap Types. Knowledge gaps were articulated through claims of absence or insufficiency, with formulations such as "little attention" [58], "under-researched" [13], or "few studies have been conducted" [58]. In contrast, evidence gaps were articulated through references to inconsistency or contradiction across existing findings, as exemplified by one article noting that "the findings of previous studies have

been inconsistent" [79]. Similarly, evaluation gaps appeared in formulations calling for empirical verification, including claims that an instructional approach *"has not been systematically evaluated"* [44] or that frameworks *"have not been empirically assessed or compared"* [155]. By comparison, practice gaps were articulated through references to discrepancies between research and practice, evident in statements that classroom practices *"deviate from what research suggests is effective"* [102] or that approaches *"are not covered by existing research"* 118. Methodological gaps were articulated through critiques of existing approaches, as when one article observed that prior studies had *"predominantly employed corpus-based and survey approaches"* before arguing for a *"mixed-methods approach"* [86]. Finally, theoretical gaps appeared in formulations calling for theory extension or refinement, seen in questions about the role of context in determining meaning [59] or in arguments for a view of resilience as *"adaptive, developmental, and dynamic"* [159]. Collectively, these articulations illustrate how each gap type functions as a distinct rhetorical resource for justifying inquiry.

4.2. Discussion

This study set out to examine how gap-spotting operates in applied linguistics research in practice, focusing on how research gaps are constructed, how different types of gaps are mobilized rhetorically, and how these practices shape orientations to knowledge production within the Iranian context. The analysis revealed that gap-spotting is the dominant strategy for formulating and justifying research questions in Iranian applied linguistics journals, with 90% of articles containing explicitly stated research questions relying on gap-based justifications. Beyond documenting this prevalence, the findings illuminate patterned ways of constructing research significance that carry important epistemological implications. This discussion is organized around three overarching patterns: the primacy of absence-based justification, the auxiliary status of methodological and theoretical concerns, and the epistemological orientations that different gap constructions enact.

4.2.1. The Primacy of Absence: Knowledge Gaps as the Dominant Justification

The dominant pattern emerging from the findings is the overwhelming reliance on knowledge gaps as the primary justification for research. Of the 169 articles that formulated research questions through gap-spotting, 81% positioned a knowledge gap as their central rationale, with a quarter of these relying exclusively on absence-based claims. This pattern is consistent with findings from other disciplinary contexts, where gap-

spotting—particularly the identification of knowledge gaps—has been documented as the dominant strategy for legitimizing research (Sandberg & Alvesson, 2011; Chatterjee & Davison, 2020; Wald et al., 2024). It also aligns with Razavipour and Farzaneh's (2025) finding that gap-spotting predominates in top-tier international applied linguistics journals, suggesting that this pattern reflects broader disciplinary norms rather than being unique to the Iranian context.

What makes this pattern significant is not merely its prevalence but how it structures the logic of inquiry. When a knowledge gap anchors a study, the research agenda becomes organized around documentation and description. The value of the study is positioned as lying in having been conducted at all—in adding empirical material from a setting, population, or context previously absent from the scholarly record. This logic of justification carries specific consequences for how knowledge is conceptualized. Research becomes an act of filling containers rather than reconfiguring understandings. The underlying assumption is that scholarly progress occurs through accumulation: adding studies of new contexts, new participant groups, or new instructional settings to an ever-expanding empirical base. What remains unquestioned in this framing is whether those contexts needed investigating in the first place, or whether the conceptual frameworks brought to bear on them are adequate to the phenomena they purport to explain.

Drawing on Alvesson and Sandberg (2013), whose critique of gap-spotting highlights the taken-for-granted, self-evident logic it often assumes, and on Chatterjee and Davison (2020), who explicitly argue that the gap-spotting approach rests on the fallacious premise that “because something has not yet been done, there is value (a contribution) in doing it” (p. 227), we argue that the rhetorical power of knowledge gaps lies in their apparent self-evidence. Claims that “little is known” or “few studies have examined” function as intuitively compelling warrants because they tap into a shared understanding that scholarship ought to expand the boundaries of what is known. Yet this self-evidence masks a set of choices: about what counts as worth knowing, about whose contexts merit investigation, and about whether absence from the literature constitutes a sufficient reason for inquiry. In treating knowledge gaps as natural justifications, researchers may inadvertently foreclose more fundamental questions about whether existing frameworks of understanding are adequate. This concern echoes Alvesson and Sandberg's (2013) critique that gap-spotting, when used unreflectively, tends to encourage cumulative extensions of existing knowledge rather than more critical, reflexive, or assumption-challenging forms of research.

4.2.2. The Auxiliary Status of Method and Theory

A second pattern concerns the relative marginalization of methodological and theoretical gaps as independent drivers of research agendas. Across the corpus, only 2% of articles positioned a methodological gap as their primary justification, and just 3% did so for theoretical gaps. In the vast majority of cases where these gap types appeared, they functioned in supportive rather than primary roles, strengthening knowledge gap claims rather than independently motivating inquiry.

This pattern warrants careful interpretation. It is not that methodological and theoretical concerns are absent from the corpus; rather, they are rarely framed as the central rationale for conducting research. When authors invoke methodological gaps, they typically do so to argue that previous approaches have been limited in ways that justify a different design. Yet the justification remains anchored in the claim that the topic itself is underexplored (a knowledge gap), with the methodological innovation serving as an additional warrant. Similarly, theoretical gaps appear primarily as refinements within existing frameworks rather than challenges to them. In both cases, theory functions as a resource to be extended or specified rather than as an object of critical interrogation.

Building on Alvesson and Sköldbberg (2009), whose discussion of reflexive methodology treats methodological and theoretical gaps as frequently secondary, we contend that the auxiliary status of methodological and theoretical gaps reveals something important about the epistemological commitments underlying research practice in this corpus. Knowledge production is conceived primarily as an empirical endeavor: adding new observations, documenting new contexts, generating new data. Method and theory, while acknowledged as important, are treated as means to this end rather than as sites of contribution in their own right. This orientation ensures that research remains grounded in empirical phenomena and responsive to the specificities of context. Iranian applied linguistics research, as represented in this corpus, is overwhelmingly concerned with documenting and understanding language teaching and learning in Iranian educational settings, a valuable project of contextual knowledge production. Yet the marginalization of theoretical and methodological contributions as independent rationales may also limit the field's capacity for conceptual innovation. When theory is always in service of empirical description, it becomes difficult to ask questions that challenge the adequacy of existing frameworks or to imagine phenomena in ways that prevailing theories cannot capture.

4.2.3. Epistemological Orientations Enacted Through Gap-Spotting

The cumulative pattern of gap use across the corpus enacts a distinctive orientation toward scholarly inquiry, one that privileges

accumulation, contextual replication, and empirical verification over conceptual disruption or paradigm transformation. Informed by Müller-Bloch and Kranz's (2015) framework for research gap types, and by Nyanhoka et al.'s (2019) documentation of how knowledge gaps and evidence gaps are often co-articulated in research justification, we argue that this orientation is most clearly visible in how knowledge and evidence gaps operate in tandem. Knowledge gaps frame research as addressing absence; evidence gaps frame it as resolving uncertainty. Together, they construct an image of scholarly progress as the gradual filling of voids and the progressive clarification of ambiguous findings through additional empirical work. The assumption is that more research—conducted in more contexts, with more participants, using more refined instruments—will eventually yield a comprehensive and reliable understanding of phenomena.

The prevalence of evaluation gaps as secondary justifications reinforces this orientation. When authors argue that existing frameworks or interventions have not been systematically evaluated, they position their studies within the logic of validation. The goal is to test whether something works, not to ask whether the categories of "working" or the frameworks themselves are adequate to the complexities of educational practice. Research becomes an exercise in confirming or disconfirming existing propositions rather than in generating new ways of thinking about educational problems.

Practice gaps, similarly, construct knowledge as something that should ultimately inform professional action. This orientation values knowledge for its usefulness—its capacity to improve teaching, inform policy, or enhance learning outcomes. While this practical orientation is understandable given the field's applied mission, it also carries risks. When usefulness becomes the primary criterion for valuing knowledge, research that complicates rather than informs practice, or that questions the very goals toward which practice is oriented, may struggle to find justification within this framework.

What is notably absent from this epistemological configuration is space for inquiry that aims to disrupt or transform existing understandings. Theoretical gaps, which might provide such space, appear rarely and then primarily as calls for refinement rather than reconceptualization. The field's dominant mode of knowledge production, as reflected in this corpus, is cumulative and confirmatory: adding to what is known, verifying what has been proposed, extending what has been found to new contexts. The possibility that research might challenge the adequacy of prevailing frameworks, reveal the limitations of dominant constructs, or imagine phenomena in ways that existing theories cannot accommodate is marginalized within this logic.

This is not to suggest that individual studies in the corpus lack critical or transformative potential, nor that Iranian applied linguistics research is uniformly conservative in its orientation. The paradigmatic diversity of the corpus, including qualitative, critical, and sociocultural approaches, suggests that alternative epistemological commitments are present. Yet the dominance of knowledge-gap justification across these diverse approaches indicates that even studies with potentially transformative aims are framed within conventional rhetorical structures. The question becomes whether this framing contains or constrains their transformative potential, or whether it simply represents a strategic accommodation to disciplinary expectations about what counts as legitimate research.

4.2.4. Synthesis: Gap-Spotting as a Disciplinary Practice

Overall, these patterns reveal gap-spotting as more than a neutral strategy for formulating research questions. It is a practice through which researchers position their work within particular epistemological traditions and align themselves with specific understandings of what scholarly contribution looks like. The overwhelming dominance of knowledge gaps, the auxiliary status of methodological and theoretical concerns, and the cumulative, confirmatory orientation these patterns enact together constitute a distinctive research culture—one that values empirical coverage and contextual replication over conceptual innovation and paradigm challenge.

This culture is not unique to Iranian applied linguistics. The patterns identified here likely reflect broader disciplinary norms in applied linguistics globally, as suggested by comparable findings in international journals (Razavipour & Farzaneh, 2025). What makes the Iranian context analytically interesting is not its exceptionalism but rather how global disciplinary norms are enacted and reproduced within a specific national education and research infrastructure (Rezvani et al., 2021). Iranian scholars, like their international counterparts, are socialized into ways of constructing research significance that privilege absence-filling over assumption-challenging, empirical accumulation over theoretical reconstruction.

The findings also resonate with longstanding critiques of incrementalism in the social sciences. St. Pierre (2016) argues that the dominance of gap-spotting is historically tied to positivist traditions, where identifying and filling gaps is framed as the central mode of scholarly progress. In applied linguistics, this manifests in the privileging of small extensions to existing knowledge, supported by ideals of rigor, replication, and systematic accumulation (Amini Farsani & Babaii, 2018). Recent debates point to the limitations of such a trajectory, with scholars arguing that the privileging of incremental contributions risks reinforcing epistemic silos and slowing theoretical integration (Chu & Evans, 2021; Hulstijn et al., 2014).

The findings of the study lend empirical weight to these concerns, suggesting that applied linguistics researchers may need to engage more critically with the assumptions underpinning gap-spotting and consider more generative alternatives.

Understanding these patterns matters because they shape not only how individual studies are justified but also how the field imagines its own progress, particularly as contemporary applied linguistics increasingly emphasizes reflexivity, inclusivity, resonance, and methodological creativity over static procedural checklists (Ghanbar & Rezvani, 2025). If knowledge advances primarily through filling gaps, then research agendas become organized around what has not yet been studied rather than what might need to be rethought. The challenge, as discussed in the following section, is not to abandon gap-spotting but to recognize its epistemological commitments and to create space for alternative modes of inquiry that might ask different questions and imagine different kinds of contributions.

5. Conclusion and Implications

While gap-spotting provides a useful rhetorical tool for situating new studies, its uncritical dominance risks promoting incrementalism at the expense of innovation, synthesis, and verification. Our findings align with these critiques, indicating that applied linguistics researchers would benefit from more critical scrutiny of gap-spotting's underlying assumptions and greater openness to more constructive alternatives. A more balanced approach to formulating research questions would involve complementing the gap-spotting strategy with alternative approaches such as problematization (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2013) and drawing on the guidance offered by Chatterjee and Davison (2020), who provide concrete illustrations of how problematization has been operationalized in empirical research. Such pluralistic approaches can stimulate creativity, challenge entrenched assumptions, and open space for more socially relevant research (Bacchi, 2009).

Moreover, Fox's (2024) rhizomatic review offers a compelling methodological alternative to what he refers to as "*gap-hunting*" (p. 1111). Rather than narrowing the focus solely to predefined gaps, the rhizomatic approach enables research questions to emerge organically from networks of ideas, fostering cross-disciplinary insights and theoretical innovation (Fox, 2024). In addition to theorizing the approach, Fox (2024) outlines general guidelines underpinning a rhizomatic mode of reviewing evidence and provides an illustrative example of how such a review can be conducted in practice. In this sense, rhizomatic exploration can balance incremental contributions with transformative inquiry, ensuring that applied linguistics

evolves as a field that values both the cumulative development of knowledge and the opening of new intellectual pathways.

We therefore propose several directions. First, researchers should critically evaluate the potential significance of the gaps they identify. Not every gap is inherently worth pursuing; when gaps are weakly theorized or insufficiently grounded in a substantive research problem, they may result in trivial or narrowly incremental studies (Chatterjee & Davison, 2020; Wald et al., 2024). Systematic reviews, meta-analyses, and emerging rhizomatic approaches to reviewing (Fox, 2024) offer valuable means of distinguishing between trivial gaps and those with theoretical, methodological, or practical significance. Strengthening the role of such review-based practices can help ensure that research agendas are shaped by more than the pressure to produce incremental novelty. Second, the conventional reliance on research questions as the central organizing device of inquiry merits reconsideration. While research questions are often treated as the foundation of design and method, they can also function as a positivist normalizing device (St. Pierre, 2016). Earlier work in research methodology emphasizes research orientations that privilege problems, concepts, or praxis over narrowly framed questions (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2013; Bacchi, 2009). Finally, our findings point to the need to rethink the entrenched attachment to epistemological principles associated with positivism. Traditions such as post-structuralism, new materialism, science and technology studies, and even quantum-inspired epistemologies have long emphasized knowledge as conditional, relational, ideological, and socially situated (Fox & Alldred, 2022; Pennycook, 2021). Incorporating insights from these traditions could enable applied linguistics to move beyond the narrow incrementalism of gap-filling and toward a more pluralistic, reflexive, and socially engaged research culture.

In addition to these theoretical contributions, the findings also carry important practical implications for researchers, editors, and graduate programs. For researchers, the study highlights the importance of adopting diverse strategies for formulating research questions rather than relying solely on gap-filling. For editors and reviewers, it suggests legitimizing alternative framings of research significance so that innovative, problem-driven, and contextually relevant studies can gain greater visibility. For graduate programs, it underscores the need to train students in multiple approaches to question formulation, equipping future scholars and teacher-researchers with the skills to design studies that move beyond incremental contributions. By addressing these different levels of practice, the field can foster a more inclusive, dynamic, and impactful research culture.

In conclusion, while gap-spotting will most likely remain a central part of research practice, its dominance should not go unchallenged. By diversifying the strategies through which research questions and problems are

articulated—whether through problematization, critical confrontation, conceptual innovation, or rhizomatic exploration—applied linguistics can maintain the benefits of incremental accumulation while also fostering innovation, replication, and socially responsive inquiry. The challenge for the field, particularly in contexts such as Iran where institutional and publishing conventions reinforce incrementalism, is to embrace a more balanced research agenda: One that values not only filling gaps but also questioning the assumptions that define what counts as a gap in the first place.

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