



Rethinking Incrementalism in Applied Linguistics Research

Kioumars Razavipour^{1*}

Nima Farzaneh²

Abstract

Incrementalism refers to the epistemic belief that the edifice of knowledge is built one brick at a time. In actual research practice, incrementalism is realized through spotting gaps in the literature, a widely used approach for developing research questions and justifying studies. Gap-spotting is so common and taken for granted that it has become one of the grand narratives of today's academic knowledge practices. Grand narratives often go unnoticed and hence unchallenged; thus, gap-spotting must be submitted to critical scrutiny. Taking such a critical stance, this study employs a synchronic approach using a qualitative content analysis of 238 original research articles published between 2016 and 2025 in six top-tier international Applied Linguistics journals. Findings suggest that, irrespective of paradigmatic differences, an overwhelming majority of articles rely on gap-spotting to craft researchable questions and to justify their significance. Our analysis also indicates that the gap-spotting research habit promotes incremental research, an adding-to-the-literature attitude, and an occasional narrowing of vision in research. The study highlights the epistemological assumptions underpinning gap-spotting and suggests the potential of rhizomatic review as an alternative approach. These findings carry implications for research conduct, pedagogy, and the reconsideration of conventional literature review practices in Applied Linguistics.

Keywords: applied linguistics, epistemology, gap-spotting, incrementalism, research

The pace at which academic papers are being written and published today is unprecedented. The question for us, however, is: are the boundaries of knowledge being pushed forward at the same pace as papers are being published? The answer is unlikely to be affirmative. Lamenting the "rise of nonsense in academic research," [Alvesson et al. \(2017\)](#) cast conservatism to the winds and maintain that

We are currently witnessing not merely a decline in the quality of scientific research but a proliferation of meaningless research of no value to society and of only modest value to its authors- apart from the context of securing employment and promotion. The

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1. Associate Professor, Department of English Language and Literature, Shahid Chamran University of Ahvaz, Iran. (Corresponding Author) k.razavipour@scu.ac.ir
2. PhD candidate, Department of English Language and Literature, Shahid Chamran University of Ahvaz, Iran. nimafarzaneh83@gmail.com

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explosion of published outputs, at least in social science, creates a noisy, cluttered environment which makes meaningful research difficult to identify and develop as well as rare, as different voices compete to capture the limelight even briefly (pp. 4-5).

The noted explosion in academic publishing has to a large extent to do with surviving the publish or perish academic regime. One survival strategy in the publish-or-perish game that has enabled the noted explosion is a belief in incrementalism, which, in practice, is realized through gap-spotting. Textbooks on research methods unanimously advise researchers to review past work to spot a gap or lacuna and then try to narrow, bridge, or fill it. As such, researchers routinely review the existing literature to identify gaps and formulate research questions accordingly (see [Alvesson & Sandberg, 2013](#); [Chatterjee & Davison, 2020](#); [Sandberg & Alvesson, 2011](#); [Wald et al., 2024](#)). Gap-spotting has recently become further reinforced by findings from genre analysis studies, which advise academic writers to employ gap-spotting as an effective rhetorical move for defining a research niche ([Moreno & Swales, 2018](#)).

Despite its prevalence, the gap-spotting approach does not automatically ensure that the underlying research problem is meaningful or significant. In other words, the problem is not merely an excess of publications, but a deeper lack of critical attention to identifying and addressing research problems. While the rationale for research is expected to rest on a clearly articulated research problem, in many cases, the distinction between "gap" and "problem" is blurred, and the two are used interchangeably. However, the two are not synonymous. A research problem refers to a substantive issue in theory, practice, or society that demands scholarly investigation ([Booth et al., 2008](#)). A research gap, on the other hand, simply signals an absence, under-exploration, or neglect in prior studies ([Sandberg & Alvesson, 2011](#)). As [Wald et al. \(2024\)](#) note, not every gap is worth filling; unless grounded in a compelling research problem, it risks leading to trivial or incremental studies.

That said, although "claiming an original and unique 'contribution' is currently de rigeur in every research publication, yet this usually amounts to trivial additions to small outposts of literature only meaningful to tiny research microtribes" ([Alvesson et al., 2017](#), p. 7). Moreover, heavy reliance on this research habit might insulate us within particular mindsets and blind us to possible alternative ways of thinking. In particular, gap-spotting is underlined by the positivist belief in the incremental character of knowledge (see [St. Pierre, 2016](#)). Subsequently, gap-spotting has become a cost-effective strategy for conducting research and publishing papers without delving deeply into the history and philosophy of knowledge. In the words of [St. Pierre \(2016\)](#), gap spotting is enabled by "the rush to application" and "the leap to methodology" (p. 22).

In researching L2 education and Applied Linguistics, gap-spotting is often framed within the rhetoric of academic discourse. Under the influence of the Swales CARS model (see [Moreno & Swales, 2018](#)), spotting a gap is considered a necessary move in making a case for the significance of a study. Being mostly concerned with textual and rhetorical structures, such

studies might not explicitly focus on a critical examination of the epistemological assumptions underpinning gap-spotting practice (see e.g., [Amirian et al., 2008](#); [Balagtas & Domingo, 2021](#); [Flowerdew, 2022](#); [Khamaiseh, 2023](#); [Jaroongkhongdach et al., 2012](#); [Lim, 2012](#); [Lin & Evans, 2012](#); [Marefat et al., 2021](#); [Moreno & Swales, 2018](#); [Peyravi et al., 2025](#); [Zhou et al., 2023](#)). Therefore, given the faith placed in the necessity and plausibility of gap-spotting, such studies often fail to reflect on the epistemological assumptions underpinning gap-spotting practice critically. In this paper, we set out to undertake exactly this kind of critical scrutiny, examining how gap-spotting practices operate in Applied Linguistics research. The study addresses the following research problem: while gap-spotting is a prevalent strategy in Applied Linguistics, its implications for identifying substantive research problems and shaping meaningful contributions to the field remain unclear. Specifically, we examine common approaches to establishing research gaps in a sample of recent papers published in top-tier international journals of the field. We hope that such an inquiry would stimulate thought and foster epistemological reflection in our field, and help avoid methodological proceduralism that might befall it. As [Alvesson and Sköldberg \(2000\)](#) point out, "social research without philosophically informed reflection easily grows so unreflective that the label research becomes questionable" (p.7).

In the next section, we briefly review research on gap spotting. This is followed by an account of how we conducted this research, and the findings are presented next. We then discuss the findings and close with a few conclusions.

Research on Gap Spotting

Since temporality pervades all aspects of human life, there is a history to everything, including the nature of knowledge and episteme. As such, since there is no transcendental foundation for the current research practices, what has come to be taken as axiomatic owes its legitimacy to repetition and historical precedence. This historicity holds true for the current regime of academic writing and publishing, including the now well-established tradition of gap-spotting. We might trace the origin of this research tradition in Hegelian philosophy, according to which human civilization marches forward in a constant flow of progress; hence, tomorrow is inevitably better than today (see [St. Pierre, 2000](#)). Secondly, [Denzin and Lincoln \(2017\)](#) maintain that gap-spotting tradition is rooted in (post)positivism, where knowledge is "accretion; building blocks, adding to the edifice of knowledge" (p. 2016).

As such, in today's academic writing, research articles might contain explicit gap statements in which the word 'gap' or its synonyms appear, or in which a gap is implied without being stated directly ([Wald et al., 2024](#)). Gaps in the literature are typically presented as a problem statement ([Jacobs, 2011](#)). They are claimed based on a synthesis of the literature through a systematic review, identification by another researcher, or an unidentified, unclear basis ([Wald et al., 2024](#)). Further, researchers might identify 'absolute gaps' where there are a

few or no studies in a field, or 'synthesis gaps' where systematic reviews are needed to draw firm conclusions ([Snilstveit et al., 2016](#)).

Sandberg and Alvesson have identified three basic modes of gap-spotting, each with its own specific versions ([Alvesson & Sandberg, 2013](#); [Sandberg & Alvesson, 2011](#)). The first mode of gap-spotting is *confusion-spotting*, which involves identifying confusion in the literature. Since the available evidence is contradictory, the researcher formulates research questions to clarify the identified confusion. Searching for competing explanations in the existing literature is the main approach in this mode. Second, *neglect-spotting* highlights a neglected area in the existing literature. The neglected area of research urges the researcher to develop knowledge about it. There are three versions of neglect spotting: spotting an overlooked area where the researcher realizes that an area has not received due attention; an under-researched area where a subject has not been studied as much as it should be; and a lack of empirical support where the researcher searches for areas in existing literature that suffer from a lack of empirical evidence. Thirdly, *application spotting*, as a basic mode of formulating research questions, involves noticing a shortage of a particular theory or perspective in an area of research. Therefore, the researcher aims to extend or complement that inadequate body of literature. It bears mentioning that, in some cases, a combination of different gap-spotting strategies might be employed. Table 1 summarizes the basic gap-spotting modes and their specific versions.

Table 1

Basic Modes of Gap-Spotting and Their Specific Versions (Based on Sandberg & Alvesson, 2011)

Basic Gap-Spotting Modes	Specific Versions of Gap-Spotting Modes
Confusion Spotting	Competing Explanations
Neglect Spotting	Overlooked Area
	Under-Researched Area
	Lack of Empirical Support
Application Spotting	Extending and Complementing Existing Literature

Using [Jacobs's \(2011\)](#) taxonomy of research problems and [Müller-Bloch and Kranz's \(2015\)](#) framework for identifying research gaps, [Wald et al. \(2024\)](#) developed a typology of research gaps comprising six types of gaps: evidence gap, knowledge gap, practice gap, methodological gap, evaluation gap, and theoretical gap. Table 2 presents the categories and their definitions.

Table 2

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 behavior or practices either deviate from research findings, are not supported by research, or need to change, and so require further research.
Methodological Gap	Variation in research methods is necessary to generate new insights or avoid distorted findings.
Evaluation Gap	Research findings or propositions need to be evaluated or empirically verified.
Theoretical Gap	Theory should be applied to specific research issues to generate new insights or developed to explain a phenomenon.

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

Literature on the topic in Applied Linguistics has mostly focused on the characteristics of research questions ([Coombe, 2021](#); [Dörnyei, 2007](#); [Mackey & Gass, 2016](#); [Nassaji, 2019](#)), genre-based investigations into the presence of research questions in Move three of the introduction sections (e.g., [Ozturk, 2007](#); [Sheldon, 2011](#)), and distributional and syntactical aspects of research questions (e.g., [Ghanbar & Rezvani, 2023](#); [Lim, 2014](#)). Although investigations into the nature of gap statements have been conducted in other social science disciplines such as organization studies ([Sandberg & Alvesson, 2011](#)), education ([Jacobs, 2011](#); [Wald et al., 2024](#)), and health sciences ([Hempel et al., 2019](#); [Kearney, 2017](#); [Nyanhoka et al., 2019](#); [Robinson et al., 2011](#); [Scott et al., 2008](#); [Snilstveit et al., 2016](#)), the gap-filling approach for formulating research questions in Applied Linguistics remains to be critically examined since prevailing research practices have obscured the epistemological implications of gap-spotting as a habitual orientation. Applied Linguistics has largely remained descriptive, focusing on textual moves or methodological patterns rather than critical inquiry into the nature, prevalence, and consequences of gap-spotting, particularly regarding its role in shaping substantive research problems and epistemological perspectives.

Rather than identifying yet another unaddressed "gap," the present study takes a deliberately different stance: it interrogates the practice of gap-spotting itself. In doing so, we shift the focus from asking *what is missing in the literature* to asking *what it means for a discipline to define its research significance primarily through what is missing*. By examining how gap-spotting is deployed across 238 articles, this study contributes to a critical reflection on disciplinary research habits and invites alternatives to an unquestioned reliance on absence-finding as the foundation for inquiry. While the empirical section of the study aims to examine the extent to which the gap-spotting approach is used to formulate research questions in Applied Linguistics, the theoretical section seeks to understand the epistemological and ideological assumptions underlying this approach.

Method

Research Approach and Design

This study adopted a qualitative, exploratory, and critical research approach to examine the practice of gap-spotting in Applied Linguistics research. The inquiry is synchronic, focusing on publications from 2016 to 2025 to provide a current overview of research practices in the field. The study follows a narrative review design combined with qualitative content analysis, enabling an in-depth examination of how gap-spotting is used to formulate research questions and justify studies.

Typology and Sample Selection

Since including an exhaustive list of Applied Linguistics journals in the survey was impractical, the current investigation selected scholarly journals of higher quality and greater impact on the field. The journals were selected based on a combination of sources and considerations, including journals included in methodologically similar studies, a list of top journals in Applied Linguistics according to metrics such as impact factor, SCImago Journal Rank (SJR), and h-index, and publications in broad domains of the discipline. As such, the relevant information to support this study constitutes a corpus of research articles published in six prominent peer-reviewed international Applied Linguistics journals: *Applied Linguistics*, *Language Learning*, *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, *System*, *TESOL Quarterly*, and *The Modern Language Journal*.

Initially, 715 journal articles were randomly saved from the journals' information pages. The inclusion criteria were original research articles, as they are considered a primary source, often follow the IMRaD (Introduction, Methods, Results, and Discussion) structure, and aim to contribute new knowledge or insights to a specific field of study. As such, review articles, perspectives, opinion articles, and commentary articles, which are not considered original articles, were not included in the sample. Another inclusion criterion was the timespan. The concern over methodological issues in the field of Applied Linguistics, referred to as "methodological turn" (Byrnes, 2013) or "methodological awareness" (Plonsky, 2017), has gained prominence from mid-2010s and continued onward, promoted by addressing a verity of research approaches and issues such as quantitative research issues (Ghanbar & Rezvani, 2023; Plonsky, 2022; Razavipour & Raji, 2022; Rezvani et al., 2024), qualitative research issues (Starfield, 2015; Mirhosseini & Pearson, 2025; Riazi et al., 2023), and mixed-methods research (Hashemi & Babaii, 2013; Riazi & Candlin, 2014; Mirhosseini & Pearson, 2025; Plonsky, 2024). The underlying rationale is that, by developing a strong understanding of methodological awareness, researchers in Applied Linguistics can produce more robust and relevant findings that contribute to the field's knowledge base. Therefore, journal articles published over 10 years, between 2016 and 2025, were considered suitable for the study. The articles were ordered alphabetically, and the researchers selected every third article for the final sample. Finally, 238 articles (39 from *Applied Linguistics*, 31 from *Language Learning*, 35 from *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 42 from *System*, 49 from *TESOL Quarterly*, and 42 from *The Modern*

Language Journal) were included in the study's final sample. A wide range of quantitative, mixed-methods, and qualitative methodological approaches and designs was incorporated in the final corpus, ensuring coverage of diverse methodological approaches in the field.

Interpretive Procedure

The study involved systematically gathering gap statements and corresponding research questions from each article. Articles were read closely, and instances of explicit or implicit gap-spotting were noted. In line with the aims of the research project, a qualitative content analysis was conducted to identify patterns, prevalence, and consequences of gap-spotting. Rather than treating the material as "data" to be measured, the inquiry combined interpretive reading with thematic attention to recurring forms and functions of gap-spotting. To support transparency, frequency counts were used as a supplementary tool, not as evidence of objectivity, but as an additional lens to illuminate tendencies within the material. This approach aligns with the view of [Cohen et al. \(2018\)](#) and [Dörnyei \(2007\)](#), who note that frequency has become a standard tool in qualitative content-analytic studies, with many reports including frequency tables or statistical graphics. Including such counts, therefore, helps situate the analysis within established qualitative research practices while enhancing the clarity and communicative value of the findings. At the same time, the researchers engaged in reflexive consideration of their own assumptions about gap-spotting and incremental research, to remain critically aware of how interpretive positions might shape the reading. On this basis, the cases of gap-spotting strategy use will be outlined, with supporting excerpts from the articles. The empirical section of the study, rather than providing definitive findings, is envisioned as an exploration of the issue of interest. The analysis results are subsequently examined with respect to the research practices promoted by the gap-spotting approach in the discipline, followed by an exploration of the underlying reasons for this research habit's popularity.

Results

This section is organized around two major themes. First, we provide a descriptive account of gap-spotting in the examined corpus. Specifically, the focus is on the prevalence of gap-spotting, how gaps and research questions feature in papers, and the source of gap-spotting (primary vs. secondary). Secondly, we present findings regarding how gap spotting contributes to knowledge and research.

The analysis of the articles indicates that researchers have a strong tendency to identify research gaps in the relevant literature, formulate research questions based on those gaps, and then conduct studies to address them. Based on the analysis, in 202 out of 238 articles (85%), the rationale for the studies is, or at least is claimed to be, based on claiming a research gap (see Table 3). The remaining 36 articles (15%) did not contain a gap statement.

Table 3

Presence of Gap Statements in the Sample (N = 238)

Category	Number of Articles	Percentage (%)	Description
Articles containing gap statements	202	85%	The rationale is (or is claimed to be) based on identifying a research gap.
- Explicit gap statements	110	46%	Research gaps are clearly stated.
- Implicit gap statements	92	39%	Research gaps are implied.
Articles without gap statements	36	15%	No gap statement is identified.
Total	238	100%	

Note. Percentages are rounded to whole numbers.

In 189 articles, gap statements have led to the formulation of research questions that directly address the identified gaps. It may be assumed that gap-spotting is necessarily coupled with research questions, as if research questions somehow require a gap-spotting-type motivation. However, some publications in the sample have one but not the other. In a tiny portion of the articles (5%), researchers have identified gaps without using them as a foundation for formulating research questions. Although it is generally assumed that research without explicitly stated research questions can lead to unfocused investigations and a lack of direction, these researchers do not explicitly state their research questions. This is reflective of the challenges posed to the critical guiding role of research questions in social science research (Bryman, 2007) and arguments against using research questions as a positivist normalizing concept (St. Pierre, 2014). For instance, qualitative research methods such as conversation analysis and classical grounded theory claim to avoid attaching undue prominence to research questions and to detect them only implicitly during the course of an investigation (Bryman, 2007). Instead of explicitly formulated research questions, other terminology is used for the article's purpose, including aims, objectives, goals, and purposes. Conversely, in a few instances (21 of 238 articles in the sample, 9%), research questions are not claimed to be generated by identifying or constructing gaps in the existing literature. This indicates the conviction that research questions do not have to be based on gaps in the literature. They can challenge assumptions or examine new areas of inquiry. Interestingly, only 15 papers (6%) contain neither gap statements nor research questions. This indicates that it is also possible to publish without claiming a gap or formulating a research question. The relationship between gap statements and the presence or absence of research questions is summarized in Table 4 below.

Table 4

Relationship Between Gap Statements and Research Questions (N = 238)

Category	Number of Articles	Percentage
Gap statements leading to research questions	189	79%
Gap statements without research questions	12	5%
Research questions without gap statements	21	9%
Neither gap statements nor research questions	15	6%
Total	238	100%

Note. Percentages are calculated based on the total sample (N = 238).

Turning to the main focus of the study, the analysis suggests that gap-spotting is the prevalent way of justifying the need for further investigation and constructing research questions among researchers in the field, with no significant difference in the frequency of occurrence of explicit (110 articles or 46%) or implicit (92 papers or 39%) gap statements (see Table 3). The examined papers contained explicit gap statements using the terms 'gap', 'lacuna', and 'void'. The following are examples: "*few studies have attempted to understand English teachers' beliefs about research from their own perspective, and even fewer have focused on cross-institution comparison. This study intended to fill this research gap by addressing the following research questions*" [11]. Or "*Mobile locative media applications' value for language learning, however, remains underinvestigated. To address this lacuna, this study employed the widely used construct of language-related episodes ... to investigate language learning through participation in a mobile AR game*" [195]. In another paper, it was claimed that

Although there is a plethora of research on preparing postsecondary instructors to adequately respond to nonnative-English-speaking students' academic writing, relatively little attention has been paid to K–12 teachers' knowledge of ESL writers' developmental needs. This study therefore aims to fill this void by examining mainstream teacher candidates' perspectives on ESL writing. [93]

Several other papers in the corpus contained implicit gap statements to claim "*lack of previous research*" on a topic [e.g., 71] or to declare that research in the field "*has not yet examined*" [143] or has "*neglected*" [205] an area of study. Others claimed the "*need for additional research*" in an area [164] as the body of research in that area "*is still in its infancy*" [89] or "*limited research has examined*" [200] a topic of interest. Therefore, that topic "*remains inadequately addressed*" [82] and "*awaits further research*" [55]. Claims were also made about an issue which "*remains contentious*" [74] or confusing, and therefore, "*inconclusive findings*" in an area "*warrant further research*" [210].

As for how gaps are identified, there seem to be two general approaches, which we call primary and secondary gap-spotting. Primary gap-spotting is realized through a selective literature review or a systematic review conducted by the author. For instance, in a paper, it was stated, "*To fill the research gaps we have identified, we posed the following research questions*" [18]. A similar claim was made in [143] based on the authors' brief overview:

The previous overview suggests that role modelling occurs daily in classrooms around the world, yet research in the field of SLA has not yet examined the scope and the nature of the process in a systematic manner. ... the current exploratory study strives to begin addressing this gap by seeking answers to the following five research questions (...).

In yet another paper, the writers claimed,
To the best of our knowledge, a comprehensive delineation of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), its underlying philosophical and theoretical principles ... as well as its reframing of traditional methods like observation, linguistic analysis,

and interviews, remains inadequately addressed. Thus, our intention is to fill this gap by providing additional insights and laying the groundwork for our phenomenological approach. [82]

As shown in Table 5, in just over three-quarters (76%) of the articles, researchers state that their literature review indicates that an area of study has been neglected, under-researched, or unexplored, and therefore requires further research. Notably, no authors claimed to have identified gaps based on their own systematic reviews.

Table 5

Approaches to Research Gap Identification in the Analyzed Articles

Approach Type	Source of Gap Identification	Number of Articles	Percentage (%)	Description
Primary gap-spotting	Author's own selective literature review	154	76%	Gaps identified directly by the author based on a selective review.
	Author's own systematic review	0	0%	No cases where authors identified gaps through their own systematic review.
Secondary gap-spotting	Other researchers' selective literature review	44	22%	Gaps identified by others through selective reviews.
	Other researchers' systematic review	4	2%	Gaps identified by others through systematic reviews.
Total	-	202	100%	-

Secondary gap-spotting, in contrast, refers to cases in which authors rely on other researchers' identification of gaps, whether reported in a selective or systematic literature review. This approach was found in approximately one quarter of the studies (24%), corresponding to 48 out of 202 articles (See Table 5). The following extract illustrates an instance of a gap attributed to another researcher:

As Ortega (2019:32) points out, the multilingualism of marginalized and minoritized communities is rarely the focus of applied linguistic research, which has tended to focus on elite bilingualism. Responding to this gap, this study was conducted (...). [47]

In another paper [55], the authors wrote,
According to Zhang and Va'squez (2014: 62), '[u]ser perceptions of, and reactions to, authentic online business responses represents a pressing issue (and one with obvious implications for reputation management), which awaits further research.' We respond to these calls by using experimental methods to empirically gauge the effectiveness of different styles of webcare.

Gaps identified in the authors' systematic reviews were found in only four papers. In [164], for instance, the authors state that the "*need for additional research was underscored in Hiver et al.'s (2021) systematic review of engagement in language learning.*"

The prevalence of gap-spotting research in Applied Linguistics is hardly surprising as this approach seems to also dominate research in most of the other disciplines in social sciences, including management, sociology, psychology, and education (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2013, p. 5), as well as health sciences (Nyanchoka et al., 2019; Robinson et al., 2011; Snilstveit et al., 2016). Most importantly, this research habit seems to stimulate incremental research, an attitude of adding to the literature, and a narrowing of vision in research. Each of these is detailed in the remainder of this section.

The gap-spotting approach contributes to incremental research. Incrementalism advocates building positively upon existing knowledge (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2013, p. 12). This positivist orientation in research (see Denzin & Lincoln, 2017) favors gap-spotting as the approach to constructing research questions (St. Pierre, 2016, p. 24). Researchers strive to build positively on earlier studies and produce "consensus-confirming knowledge, which modifies and advances but rarely alters or adds significantly to existing knowledge" (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2013, p. 13). As mentioned earlier, 85% of the papers in the sample have used gap-spotting as a starting point for identifying problems that are then addressed through incrementalism. The explicit building upon established ideas and advancements is stated in a number of papers. In a paper, for instance, it is asserted that "*The current study builds on previous research by investigating the productive lexical development of L2 Spanish use using spontaneous oral data ...*" [39]. In another paper, the authors insist that their "*study builds upon existing scholarship by illustrating the potential of (even limited exposure to) SFL genre pedagogy to shift teachers' writing instruction toward social semiotic perspectives of language and literacy*" [67]. As such, while gap-spotting identifies areas where existing knowledge or practices are incomplete or inadequate, incremental research focuses on making small, gradual changes to address these gaps.

Focusing efforts on extending and enriching the literature is frequently stated as the aim of studies that rely on gap-spotting to formulate research questions. The prevalent practice of adding to the literature is clearly evident in research articles, where researchers embark on investigations that fit neatly within today's established popular theories and the development and circulation of those theories (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2013; Miller et al., 2009). This intention is stated as the overall purpose of the study in 79 papers (39%) in the sample. This attitude to knowledge production is demonstrated in the following example:

(...) the present study seeks to add to the extant knowledge on language ideologies by illustrating the complex ways experiences with raciolinguistic policing inform Latinx TCs' perceptions of their language practices and overall sense of ethnic identity. Further, our study also contributes to the existing literature by centering Latinx TC's creative responses to raciolinguistic ideologies in circulation. [48]

Another researcher emphasized the paucity of knowledge about a topic and claimed that his study "*enriches that literature further by adding a study abroad dimension*" [130]. In a similar case, researchers asserted that their study "*adds to the body of research on translanguaging, play, and identity work, filling a much-needed gap of representation from the Global South*" [141]. Another author insisted that the study attempted to "*expand our theoretical understanding of*" [141] a topic of interest.

While this attitude helps researchers increase the number of their publications, the quality of their contributions remains questionable. One compelling reason for this phenomenon is that claiming a gap often indicates the possibility of doing a research study, but fails to provide a convincing justification for its contribution to knowledge ([Chatterjee & Davison, 2020](#); [Pratt, 2009](#); [Wald et al., 2024](#)). As this approach cannot demonstrate the need for a research study, it cannot be argued that whatever has not yet been done necessarily represents a worthwhile contribution to the field. In other words, not everything that is overlooked or underrepresented could serve as the starting point for intellectually stimulating research. As a result, while reported in a sophisticated manner, the majority of the papers might not necessarily generate new thinking. In this regard, [Wald et al. \(2024\)](#) argue that "the rarity of seeking and claiming a worthwhile theoretical gap as the basis for research" is responsible for this problem, not the employment of a gap-filling strategy (p. 319).

Another consequence of heavy reliance on gap indication is that it contributes to a narrowing of vision in research. While articles in the areas of cognitive, developmental, or experimental psychology report on multiple related experiments and juxtapose them to arrive at a more plausible interpretation, in Applied Linguistics, different aspects of the same data set from the same study are reported in separate articles as identified gaps to be addressed ([Dekeyser, 2010](#)). While this enables the authors to publish frequently and further their research portfolios, the resulting research outputs are less coherent ([Collins & Dagenais, 2010](#)). The practice of reporting different parts of a research project in separate articles is reported in exactly a quarter (25%) of the papers and is evident in the following excerpt:

In this article, we report on findings from part of a larger project designed to investigate the effects of double play (in comparison to single play) on listening performance, cognitive processing, metacognitive strategy use, and anxiety. The current study reports on the quantitative part of the project, which focused on students' listening performance, metacognitive strategy use, and anxiety. The qualitative findings on cognitive processes are discussed elsewhere (see Holzknrecht, 2019; Holzknrecht, in preparation). [80]

A similar assertion was made by another author who wrote, "*As part of a larger investigation of the implementation of plurilingual instruction (Galante et al. 2019) and teachers' perceptions (Galante et al. 2020), the study reported in this article focuses on data gathered from students only*" [56]. Here is another similar quote: "*The data were collected for a larger project examining Finnish learners' fluency in English from different perspectives (for*

analyses regarding other types of data, notably L2 English dialogues, see e.g., Peltonen, 2017)" [115].

It is important to acknowledge that it is not always wrong or undesirable to publish more than one paper out of a single research project. For instance, PhD projects may be large enough to generate more than one article. However, this practice increases the risk of salami publications, i.e., "inappropriate fragmentation of data into the smallest publishable units" (Ding et al., 2020, p. 282). As "gatekeepers of knowledge" (Schrier, 2010, p. 642) and the publication process in scholarly research, journal editors and reviewers need to take measures to ensure that only high-quality research is sent for peer review and ultimately accepted for publication.

Overall, our analysis revealed that gap-spotting is the dominant strategy for demonstrating the importance of a study and/or for constructing research questions in Applied Linguistics, despite the variety of approaches and strategies. There are, as might be expected, exceptions that include some elements of other strategies. In a few instances, the researchers have tried to problematize the established ideas and assumptions underlying a particular subject matter, or continue a tradition by conducting a follow-up study. However, the use of rhetorical steps and linguistic choices aligned with gap-spotting is a frequent occurrence even when the research questions are claimed to be formed through other approaches (Sandberg & Alvesson, 2011). For instance, the authors claim that they aim "*to problematize ... the role of learning context in TBLT inquiry*" and then go on to formulate a research question to address *the "clear lacuna of studies exploring the role of instruction during study abroad"* [26]. With this in mind, concerns about the potential limitations of this strategy, including the fact that it can lead to incremental development of theories rather than more innovative work, deserve a more nuanced treatment.

Discussion

The primary aim of this study was to explore how the gap-spotting approach in Applied Linguistics shapes research question formulation, knowledge generation, and the field's broader epistemological orientation. Based on an empirical study of journal articles in Applied Linguistics, we found that incremental gap-spotting is the dominant approach to developing research questions from the existing literature, with 85% of articles in our sample explicitly or implicitly relying on this practice. The findings seem to more or less mirror those of Sandberg and Alvesson (2011) and Wald et al. (2024), however, in a different social science discipline. Critically, while these studies emphasize the technical and rhetorical aspects of gap-spotting, our study demonstrates that this practice also carries epistemological and methodological consequences. Specifically, the findings suggest that:

1. **Incrementalism dominates research outputs.** Gap-spotting encourages building on existing knowledge incrementally rather than pursuing transformative or high-risk research. This supports Alvesson and Sandberg's (2013) notion of "consensus-confirming knowledge" (p. 13), but extends it by empirically demonstrating its

prevalence in Applied Linguistics. While incremental research maintains coherence and comparability, it may limit theoretical innovation and the pursuit of novel research problems.

2. **Gap-spotting reinforces a linear and cumulative view of knowledge in the field.** As highlighted in the literature review, gap-spotting presupposes that knowledge accumulates linearly and can be represented accurately through systematic literature reviews ([Fox, 2024](#); [St. Pierre, 2016](#)). Our findings show that most articles treat gaps as objective voids to be filled, with limited critical reflection on whether the identified gaps represent meaningful or socially relevant research problems. This aligns with the critiques by [Kuhn \(1962\)](#) and [Hacking \(1983\)](#) about the illusory linearity of scientific progress.
3. **Narrowing of vision and potential "salami slicing."** The study finds that approximately 25% of articles report parts of larger projects as separate studies, demonstrating a fragmentation of research outputs. While multiple publications can be justified (e.g., PhD projects), this pattern reflects the risk of prioritizing quantity over conceptual depth, consistent with the "publish or perish" pressures highlighted in prior literature ([Canagarajah, 2010](#); [Dekeyser, 2010](#)).
4. **Limited engagement with substantive research problems.** While gap-spotting efficiently identifies areas for incremental inquiry, it does not inherently ensure that the resulting research questions address significant theoretical or practical problems. Many studies in the sample were found to fill a gap without advancing broader understanding or challenging underlying assumptions—a concern previously noted by [Wald et al. \(2024\)](#) in other social sciences.

The dominance of gap-spotting, along with its epistemological and methodological consequences, appears to be driven by a combination of stylistic, institutional, and social factors within the field that encourage, or even compel, researchers to use it. Concerning the structure and style of research articles, as discussed previously, the gap-spotting research habit has been further promoted by findings from genre analysis studies. The research conducted by genre analysts demonstrates that the CARS framing of introductions is fairly consistent across research articles in various disciplines ([Moreno & Swales, 2018](#); [Swales, 1990, 2004](#)). Furthermore, institutional attitudes that have long existed in governments, universities, educational establishments, and research institutions seem to strongly influence and regulate the conduct of research through their policies and assessment criteria. Increased pressure from the governments and "publish or perish" policies at universities requires academics and PhD students to publish frequently in international journals in an effort to expand their research portfolio, be promoted, and secure academic recognition ([Canagarajah, 2010](#); [Dekeyser, 2010](#); [Ellis, 2010](#); [Zuengler & Carroll, 2010](#)). Given their busy schedules, they resort to gap-spotting research because it is uncontroversial, safe, and often easy to conduct ([Alvesson & Sandberg,](#)

2013). Finally, in social sciences, the knowledge accumulation norm reinforces gap-spotting research ([St. Pierre, 2016](#), p. 24). This norm emphasizes the importance of accumulating evidence, refining theories, and ensuring comparability across studies to foster cumulative insights ([Abbott, 2006](#)). As such, incremental advancements in a field are often accompanied by gap statements. From our standpoint, however, these norms and conventions are merely symptoms of a wider and much deeper phenomenon: the dominance of positivism in research, particularly in social sciences. This reading resonates with previous critiques that have highlighted the field's remarkable affinity with positivistic assumptions towards knowledge ([Amini Farsani & Babaii, 2018](#); [Benson et al., 2009](#); [Cohen & Macaro, 2010](#); [Gao et al., 2001](#); [Lazaraton, 2005](#); [Mehrani & Khodi, 2014](#)).

Genre-based research often overlaps with positivism, especially when it leverages positivist approaches to analyze patterns and trends, often through quantifiable analysis. These analyses have highlighted a high degree of uniformity across the structural conventions of academic articles. It appears that genre-based approaches explicitly instruct writers to follow certain rhetorical structures and observe the provided moves and steps, thereby reinforcing certain research habits and mechanics based on findings from genre analysis. In other words, genre-based approaches to writing in EAP aspire to determine the rhetorical organization and the linguistic features associated with academic genres such as the research article through positivist approaches and then use the results of this text analytical scheme to stabilize the gap-spotting approach by suggesting that writers employ gap-spotting as the preferred option for establishing a research niche.

"Publish or perish" policy in academia, with the potential negative consequence of focus on quantity over quality, is strongly reminiscent of one of the basic tenets of positivism: "trust in numbers" ([St. Pierre, 2016](#), p. 25). The discourse of positivism, according to [Bridges \(2017\)](#), is characterized by "a confidence in numbers and what can be measured as a firm and objective basis for decisions" (p. 38). With respect to the politics of knowledge production and dissemination, arguably the most noticeable trend is the evaluation of academics based on easy-to-measure metrics such as publication and citation rates. Positivism also contributes to the "publish or perish" policy by valuing scientific inquiry and empirical evidence. This way, positivism provides a foundation for the value placed on publications and establishes a framework in which publication becomes the primary means of demonstrating research output and advancing knowledge.

Incrementalism as a fundamental scientific ideal is often seen as a tenet of positivism ([St. Pierre, 2016](#), p. 24). [Burrell and Morgan \(1979\)](#) assert that positivist epistemology, in essence, depends heavily on knowledge accumulation and assumes that the advancement of knowledge is fundamentally a cumulative process in which new insights are added to the existing body of knowledge and false hypotheses are gradually revised or totally eliminated (p. 5). Incrementalism in social science research manifests as researchers' attempts to identify gaps in the existing literature and then formulate research questions to fill them ([St. Pierre, 2016](#), p.

24). While the accumulationist model of knowledge production emphasizes that scientific progress is linear and gradual, this view has been severely criticized by philosophers, sociologists, and other researchers. Thomas Kuhn provided a thorough critique of the incremental advances in knowledge. In his philosophy of science, he viewed scientific progress as rather uneven and discontinuous, with periods of slow accumulation interrupted by the breakdown of established theories as rival theories challenge the consensus and ultimately overthrow a prevailing theory, taking its place ([Mills, 2023](#)). He noted that

scientists like to think that knowledge production is a linear process and that they are progressing toward certainty, but that there is little evidence that this is so. He argued that scientists are generally ahistorical and that incrementalism is mostly an effect of textbooks that smooth out so-called gaps to present certain kinds of knowledge as secure. ([St. Pierre, 2016](#), p. 24)

The philosopher of science Ian Hacking also critiqued incremental contributions in his discussion of the growth of knowledge. Discussing the idea of convergence on the truth as a criterion for the growth of knowledge, he pointed out that "there can be heapings up of knowledge without there being any unity of science to which they all add up. There can also be an increasing depth of understanding and breadth of generalization without anything properly called convergence" ([Hacking, 1983](#), pp. 55–56). Despite harsh critiques, the dominance of positivist incremental research still seems widespread, and it exerts a significant influence on the politics of knowledge production and dissemination. As a recent example, [Foster et al. \(2015\)](#) found that high-risk, innovative studies are rare in biomedical research, while researchers have focused on developing incremental knowledge contributions based on established knowledge. The ideal of knowledge accumulation is thus considered partly responsible for a serious shortage of high-impact contributions.

The logic behind gap-spotting, representational logic, is often viewed as having ties to positivism, particularly logical positivism. According to [Fox \(2024\)](#), "gap-spotting depends upon a representational logic, assuming that a review reveals the 'current scientific wisdom' on a field of study, and thereby that which is yet to be represented by scientific research" (p. 1111). In other words, researchers assume a complete and accurate representation of the current scientific understanding of a field, and then identify gaps based on what they believe is missing from that representation. This approach can be problematic if the assumed 'scientific wisdom' is incomplete or inaccurate. The resulting research questions may not be truly innovative or address the most pressing issues.

Overall, it is felt that researchers need to rethink the traditional literature review approach that emphasizes pinpointing gaps and instead go beyond positivism by incorporating post-structuralist approaches to inform research practice. A highly influential concept explored by post-structuralists such as Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari is rhizome analysis. Drawing a parallel with the natural rhizome as a root system that spreads horizontally and allows

connections between any two points, Deleuze and Guattari's philosophy of rhizomatic analysis (or rhizoanalysis) describes the rhizome as a network or an assemblage with dynamic, constantly evolving connections between its components ([Sherman & Teemant, 2020](#)). The rhizome is always in a state of flux, continually establishing new connections and forging new linkages, and it is constantly changing and becoming different ([Storm, 2015](#)). This philosophy presents a contrast to positivist determinism in social science and education ([Ko & Bal, 2019](#)) by offering "a theoretical frame that emphasizes interactive relationships among a conflux of elements, conditions, and forces in a given social situation" to co-constitute something ([Hordvik et al., 2020](#), p. 2). Rhizomatic ways of thinking emphasize "multiplicity, connection, antirepresentation/ interpretation, emergence and possibility" over the linear and vertical worldview of positive determinism ([Sherman & Teemant, 2020](#), p. 5). Leveraging the Deleuzo-Guattarian metaphor of the 'rhizome', [Fox \(2024\)](#) proposes a literature and evidence review approach that can be applied across various fields, helping move beyond linear thinking and embrace complexity. A rhizomatic review, as [Fox \(2024\)](#) points out, is a research review approach in which researchers, "instead of seeking a gap in the literature to be plugged by a new study, as a review progresses through its iterations, continually ask new questions of the literature or evidence, and use these questions to follow the rhizome deeper and deeper" (p. 1111). Rhizomatic reviews, as elaborated on by [Fox \(2024\)](#), do not start with strict inclusion or exclusion criteria. Instead, the research process itself shapes the scope of the review, with researchers following leads and insights as they emerge. The process then involves exploring connections across different disciplines and fields of knowledge, recognizing that complex problems often require a multi-faceted approach. The outcome of a rhizomatic review is not predetermined. It depends on the specific research question and the connections followed throughout the process. The goal is to map out the complexities of a topic by acknowledging the interconnectedness of different fields and perspectives.

Applied Linguistics can use rhizomatic review by adopting a dynamic, open-ended approach to examining language and its application in various contexts. This involves exploring connections across disciplines, following emergent themes, and embracing the fluid nature of knowledge, much as a rhizome's sprawling, non-hierarchical structure. Applied Linguistics often addresses complex issues related to language, culture, education, and social interactions. A rhizomatic review can help explore these interconnected areas by drawing on diverse fields such as sociology, psychology, and technology. For example, a review on language learning might consider not only linguistics but also educational theories, cognitive psychology, and even the role of technology in language acquisition. Like a rhizome, a rhizomatic review acknowledges that knowledge is not static but constantly evolving and transforming. It emphasizes the "becoming" of knowledge rather than a fixed state of being. This perspective can be particularly useful in applied linguistics, where language and communication are constantly evolving in response to social and technological changes. A rhizomatic review could examine how technology, social media, and informal learning environments are reshaping

language-learning experiences. It could analyze the impact of language policy on marginalized communities and explore alternative approaches to language education. It could examine how language is used to create social identities, power dynamics, and cultural meanings in various contexts.

By embracing these principles, applied linguistics can use rhizomatic review to move beyond traditional research approaches and explore language and its applications in a more dynamic, open, and interconnected way.

Conclusion

This study critically examined the practice of gap-spotting in Applied Linguistics research and its implications for knowledge production and for the formulation of research questions. The findings demonstrate that gap-spotting is the dominant strategy in the field, promoting incremental research, reinforcing positivist assumptions, and, at times, leading to fragmented reporting of research outputs. Focusing solely on gap-spotting can lead to incremental research that reinforces positivist assumptions and might not produce innovative or impactful research. This does not mean abandoning gap-spotting altogether, but rather recognizing its limitations and the value of broader, more challenging perspectives.

The implications of this study extend to researchers, journal editors, reviewers, and pedagogy in the field. For researchers, while gap-spotting efficiently identifies research niches, they are encouraged to balance this approach with reflective consideration of substantive research problems, since exploring innovative questions beyond simple gaps may foster more impactful contributions. For journal editors and reviewers, greater awareness of the dominance of gap-spotting can support more nuanced evaluations of research novelty and significance, helping ensure that publications contribute meaningfully rather than merely fill procedural gaps. Finally, in the realm of pedagogy, teaching research methods in Applied Linguistics should incorporate critical discussion of gap-spotting, incrementalism, and epistemological assumptions, encouraging students to question the linear accumulation of knowledge and to adopt more dynamic, interconnected research approaches. In this respect, the opportunities afforded by rhizomatic review help scholars adopt methods that allow them to continuously pose new questions about the existing literature, using these inquiries to explore evidence more thoroughly.

Despite its contribution, this study is not without limitations, which should be acknowledged to contextualize the findings. It focused on a purposive sample of six top-tier journals, which may not represent all Applied Linguistics research. Only articles published between 2016 and 2025 were analyzed, limiting the examination to contemporary trends. The study also emphasized qualitative content analysis, while quantitative metrics such as citation impact or research influence were not considered.

Future research can investigate alternative approaches to literature review, such as rhizomatic or post-structuralist methods, and assess their impact on research creativity and

innovation. Longitudinal studies could evaluate how gap-spotting practices evolve over time and across subfields. In addition, scholars may explore the relationship between research problems, gap-spotting, and the societal relevance of research outputs, particularly in applied contexts.

In conclusion, while gap-spotting remains a prevalent and practical tool in Applied Linguistics research, embracing critical, reflective, and interconnected approaches may enable the field to produce more innovative, impactful, and theoretically rich knowledge. Authors, reviewers, editors, and research institutions are therefore encouraged to rethink the overemphasis on identifying gaps and instead welcome research orientations that allow for open-ended exploration and dynamic connections within a body of literature or evidence.

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