The Role of Lexical Gaps and Neologisms in Language Learning: A Consciousness-raising Perspective

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ABSTRACT:

Linguistic gaps and neologisms were investigated for their possible role in language learning. More specifically, a group of around 50 EFL majors, of Majmaah University, College of Education, KSA, have been subjected to instruction on "lexical gaps and neologisms" as part of a regular course of their syllabus on morphology/syntax. Instruction took place during five academic terms and for a set of five subgroups/batches of EFL majors. Instruction strategies were varied to cater for multiple intelligences and different learning styles. Afterwards, students were asked to write their own gaps and neologisms (in both L1 and L2). A further method of getting students to provide new meanings/senses of their own for already existing words was used. Then, a set of qualitative (phenomenological/introspective/retrospective) methods were employed to check the possible effect that the knowledge and discussion of these gaps and neologisms have on raising the students' consciousness about the depth/complexity of both the language system and language learning. Additionally, retrospective methods were also employed to probe the impact of gaps and neologisms on students' creative and critical thinking. Results strongly suggest that students' knowledge and intensified awareness of the linguistic gaps and neologisms have enriched and deepened their both language and language learning experience. This is especially the case among those who were able to provide gaps/neologisms of their own, whether by writing lexical/sentence gaps or by giving existing words of their choice new senses of their own (more than 90% of the subjects successfully did).

Keywords: Lexical gaps, Neologism, Consciousness-raising (CR), Creative/Critical Thinking, Language Learning

المستخلص:

تم بحث الدور الذي يمكن أن تلعبه "الفجوات اللغوية" Lexical Gaps و "المستجدات اللغوية" Neologisms في تعلم اللغة. شملت الدراسة 50 طالباً يدرسون اللغة الإنجليزية في كلية التربية بالجامعة في المملكة العربية السعودية (مرحلة البكالوريوس في اللغة الإنجليزية). لقد تم إخضاع هؤلاء الطلاب لتدربي معين بهدف إلى رفع واعيهم وتكوينه يوجد وأهمية الفجوات اللغوية والمستجدات اللغوية في اللغة سواء الأولى أو الثانية/الأجنبية. وقد كان ذلك ضمن دراستهم لمادة (النحو والصرف) Eng 432 Morphology and Syntax دراستهم لمادة لخمسة فصول دراسية تدريس هذه الفجوات والمستجدات. صممت أساساً حيث تستجيب للتتوع والتعدد الذكائي (الذكاء المتعدد) للطلاب وتتنوع أساليب التعلم لديهم. وبعد تدريس هذا النوع من التراكيب اللغوية عن طريق الشرح والوصف الدقيق، طلب من الطلاب كتابة مجموعة من هذا النوع من المفردات باللغتين الأولى (العربية)
1. INTRODUCTION:

The human language system is hugely complex and greatly multi-sided. At the heart of this complexity, lies the property of an inherent 'creativity' that would allow not only for the production and perception of unlimited linguistic data, out of a limited set of rules, but also, equivalently, for the production and understanding of a set of boundless would-be/possible data (Chomsky, 1965, 1972, 1981, 1986). This probable/hypothetical data may be words or phrases that are inherently permitted by the language system, but are still currently not existent. Put differently, these are "lacunae" or "gaps" that possess a great potential for both language and language learning.

One such potential, is the role of these gaps and neologisms (for the purpose of this study the two terms will largely be used interchangeably, and the slight technical differences will be discarded) in raising the EFL learners' consciousness about the complexity of the language system (the in-built creativity that dwells at the heart of it), the complexity of the language learning process, along with an opportunity of a reflection on their own learning styles that could be utilized in easing language learning.

Consciousness-raising (CR) is a strategy/approach in language education, in general, and EFL, in particular, which seeks to maximize students' awareness of language structure or function, with a view to helping achieve or enhance learning (cf. section 2.4). This study explores the impact of linguistic/lexical gaps and neologisms on intensifying the students' consciousness about the complexity of the language system, language inherent creativity and the potential this carries for language learning. It further, examines the possibility that knowledge of these gaps may foster learner autonomy and creative/critical thinking (all of which central to CR). Another key merit of (CR), that is of paramount significance, is the fact that both intentional and incidental learning are merged together. In lexical learning research, there has
been a long-standing controversy over whether it is the intentional or incidental strategy that plays the greater role in acquiring new vocabulary (Schmidt, 1994; Schmitt, 2002; Hadi & Iman, 2013). The long-standing debate has, in fact, been sparked by Krashen's 1980s famous distinction between acquisition (subconscious/inadvertent) and learning (conscious/advertent) (Krashen, 1982, 1988). With its capacity of combining the two aspects of intentional and incidental learning, (CR) coupled with other recent trends/approaches in language education have contributed enormously to critically reviewing Krashen's classical neat acquisition-learning distinction. As a result, the much more recent tendency is to view language learning as much more complex than this simple distinction might suggest; with both acquisition and learning as containing explicit/intentional and implicit non-intentional facets.

Theoretically, the study draws on the vast achievement of generative/cognitive linguistics pioneered by Chomsky and his followers since the late fifties and early sixties of the twentieth century, socio-cognitive approach to both theoretical and applied linguistics and the strategy of "consciousness-raising" in language teaching and learning.

Employing a range of qualitative data collection techniques, particularly the phenomenological method of "retrospection", a group of EFL English majors, were probed (at both individual and group levels) on the influence of the knowledge of the lexical gaps and neologisms on their consciousness of language creativity, and hence on their language learning quality and styles.

The following sections outline and report the study of the use of gaps and neologisms as a conscious-raising tool/task on a group of EFL majors, at Majmaah University, KSA.

**Theoretical Framework 2.**

### The Language System: A Socio-cognitive Perspective 2.1

Language can best be described as a socio-cognitive entity (van Dijk, 1982, 1998, 2003, Halliday 1993). This is because all attempts to view it as exclusively cognitive or exclusively social have probably failed to capture the overall picture, or have been proven to be deficient in quite a number of ways. Correspondingly, the most promising research linguistic paradigm, nowadays, is the one that combines the social and the cognitive aspects of language, be it in theoretical linguistics, applied linguistics or language education.

**What is a Linguistic/Lexical Gap? 2.2**

A lexical gap is a linguistically possible, but non-existing word in a language. Possible, because it does not violate the specific rules (esp. phonological and morphological norms) of the language in which the word is considered a lexical gap (also known as accidental gap, approximate), and non-existing because the word has never been in common use of that language. The gap can also be a sentence (and when we maximize the potential, probably, a whole text too). A classical example of the latter, is Chomsky's famous sentence gap "colourless green ideas sleep furiously".

The existence of gaps could provide strong evidence to Chomsky's key concepts of "language creativity" (its inherent property of allowing speakers to produce and understand countless\infinite number of
words\sentences that have never been heard or used before). The property of "discreteness" (the fact that inbuilt language system allows speakers to infinitely expand data "words\phrases\sentences") is also of relevance, herein. Gaps constitute creative 'silences\slots' of huge potential and paramount importance. These "silences" are capable of being creatively packed with words\sentences Fromkin, et al,(2007:88-89) sums the whole thing up as "well-formed but not existing words. The actual words in a language constitute only a subset of the possible words...no dictionary can list all possible words...there are always gaps in the lexicon- words not present but could be added". Citing possible but non-existing words such as: (blick, disobvious and linguisticism) and impossible and non-existing words such as (*bnick, *unsystem and *needlessly), the writers (ibid:.89), go on to claim that the fact that speakers' are inherently able to differentiate between the two sets, is further evidence that our minds possess "mental dictionaries", that do not contain lists of possible and impossible words, but "rules" specifying which words are possible and which ones are impossible and to infinitely add new words to our vocabulary.

What is Neologism? 2.3
Neologisms are a kind of newly-invented words\meanings. The World English Dictionary defines neologism as a "newly-coined word that has not yet been accepted into mainstream language... often attributed to specific persons, publication, period or event". This is, in many ways, consistent with the definition of the Online Free English Dictionary "the creation or use of new words or senses". Neologisms may be entirely new words, new meanings assigned to already existing words (cf. The Washington Post competition in section 3.24) or new lexemes( inflections) added to existing words. Examples of present-day technological/digital neologisms include: to "google" (search for something) and ego-surfer (someone obsessed with searching the net to find information about one's self). Other examples include: "staycation" (said for someone who spends the vocation at home or in the immediate local area), the shiftless (people who prefer to write in the lowercase), "agressocracy" (a society in which the most aggressive dominate, or which is ruled by most of its aggressive and ruthless members) (see McFedries' website of neologisms and the 54 Great Examples of Neologisms, vappingo.com). Neologisms (and gaps as well) are in some ways, similar to 'Pullet Surprises', which are wrong, but very intelligent/creative guesses. The term was first coined by Greene (1969) who collected her students' creative errors and published them in a small book entitles 'Pullet Surprises' (itself a mistake of "Pulitzer Prize"). Greene's examples include students' wrong definitions for words: monetary (a place where monkeys live), paradox (a lovely place to go when you die), longevity (being very tall) and homogenous (devoted to home life) (cf. Fromkin, et al., 2007).

Notably, there are two senses of the term "neologism"; in psychiatry the term is used to describe the special way in which psychotics such as "schizophrenics" speak. This involves the use of words and phrases with meanings specific to their users...
(schizophrenics/autistic children). The other sense of the term, is common in theology and philosophy of thought. In this sense, neologism is used to describe the invention of new ideas or new interpretation of religious books. These two senses, though not directly related to our study, are nonetheless implicative, in a number of important ways. Key among these, are the notions of "innovation", "creativity", "anomaly" and "particularity" (all of which relevant to the purposes of this investigation).

The existence of neologisms and linguistic gaps may also be read in terms of Halliday's (1993) theory of a language-based theory of learning; itself a development of his earlier three-category formulation of "learning language", "learning through language" and "learning about language", in which he proposes that learning a language should not be looked at as just a form of learning, but as "learning the foundation of learning itself" (p. 93). In Halliday's term, learning is fundamentally "a semiotic process", and "the prototypical form of human semiotic is language" (ibid.:93).

If learners could create their own gaps and neologisms, then this might as well indicate a creative form of "interlanguage" (the intermediate linguistic system that language learners constitute while in the process of language learning) (cf, Selinker, 1972, 1992). Much more recently, research on "interlanguage", has unveiled amazing facts about its "systematicity", "pluralism", "specificity", "idiosyncratic", and "socio-cognitive" nature, at the same time (all of which would seem to be central to human cognition and intelligence).

Of further particular interest, is the fact that some recent studies have unearthed that linguistic gaps and neologisms exist even in sign languages; a fact that would provide further evidence for the cognitive/mental claims of language prevalent in various forms of Chomskyan and non-Chomskyan generativism.

**Gaps and Neologisms as a Consciousness-raising Task (CR) 2.4**

Consciousness-raising has been a new trend in EFL, particularly over the last three decades (Ellis, 1991; Willis and Willis, 1996; Mohamed, 2004, etc.). Before being introduced into language education by Ellis, the term had been around in a variety of fields since the early 1960s, such as feminism, politics and psychology (group therapy). (CR) purports fundamentally at making students aware of the target language structure/function whilst performing a communicative task. Consciousness-raising is central to the larger framework of Language-Focus, Form-Focus Instruction (FFI) or more commonly Focus-on-Form (Fon F) approach.

Promoting consciousness as an integral aspect of language learning, has been introduced as a strategy of rethinking and revaluating what has become a sort of modern orthodoxy' in EFL and language pedagogy "the communicative approach/communicative language teaching CLT (CLT has been understood or misunderstood, for that matter, to have advocated or encouraged ignoring/marginalizing the role of grammatical awareness in L2 language learning).

CR tasks are described by Nunan (2011:98) as "designed to draw the learners' attention to a particular linguistic feature through a range of
inductive and deductive procedures (...) The assumption here, is not that the feature will be immediately incorporated into the learner's interlanguage, but that it is a first step in that direction".

Among the many characteristics provided for CR tasks and that are of particular relevance here: (see Ellis, 1991; Willis & Willis 1996; Bankier, n.d., etc.
- CR promotes both explicit and tacit knowledge of language.
- CR encourages cooperative learning.
- CR caters for learner differences and multiple intelligences.
- CR stimulates a conducive learning environment that capitalises on fun, learner self-satisfaction and minimizing anxiety by keeping the affective filter at its lowest position.
- CR evokes critical and creative thinking in the language learners.
- CR helps building learner autonomy, creativity and learner-centredness (Tudor, 1996; Ellis, 2003; Richards & Rodgers, 2011; Nunan, 2011).
- CR would allow for an effective use of L1 in the L2 classroom.

The use of gaps and neologisms, can presumably help achieve these goals, and as such serve as a genuinely useful CR task. Furthermore, using gaps and neologisms is more likely to incite, not only language awareness (studies of CR tasks have thus far concentrated almost exclusively on grammatical awareness), but also awareness about language learning itself. Learners can contemplate the depth and complexity of the language learning process. In this connection, students may reflect on the degree to which their 'culturally-based expectations' (Tudor 1996) may affect the quality of their learning.

Method 3.0
3.1 Subjects
The subjects for this study are all Saudi male EFL majors, studying at the English department, College of Education of Majmaah University (formerly a branch of King Saud University). Their proficiency vary from pre-intermediate to advanced levels, and they are studying a syllabus that includes, among other components, English linguistics, language skills, language acquisition and education, literature and syntax/morphology, sociolinguistics and discourse analysis.

The study of lexical gaps and neologisms is among the major components of Syntax and Morphology (Eng 423). Throughout a span of five successive terms the effect of the study of the phenomenon of lexical gaps and neologisms on heightening the students' consciousness of language and deepening their language learning experience has been carefully observed and further scrutinized using relevant qualitative methods (e.g. retrospection) of data-collection and qualitative data analysis.

Data-collection 3.2
The data for this study has been accumulated over a long period of time. For a span of five successive terms relevant data has been gathered. English majors studying at the college of education, Majmaah University, received regular classes on "lexical gaps and neologisms" as part of a course in morphology and syntax (Eng 423). The gathering of data took place via the following forms:

3.2.1 Lecturing Students about the cognitive-linguistic Phenomenon of Gaps and Neologisms:
Students received three-four hour classes on the linguistic phenomenon of "lexical gaps and neologisms". Definitions and several examples from both English and Arabic were provided. Teaching strategies were varied to suit different learning habits and styles (taking into account the recent trend of "multiple intelligences"). Very often, students were asked to present materials in class using modern data projector and to write response papers after that.

3.2.2 Getting Students to Discuss the Phenomenon of Gaps and Neologisms

Students were then asked to discuss the phenomenon of gaps and neologisms following classes. Focus discussions took various forms, formal and informal, and included discussing internet materials, as well. This intensified the students' interest in the subject and prolonged the duration of their attention and thinking about language, in general, and about the implications of this particular phenomenon for human mind cognition, in more specific terms. Relevant linguistic theory such as the "cognitive approach" and Universal Grammar LAD were presented and discussed to theoretically ground the phenomenon.

3.2.3 Getting Students to Write Three Lexical Gaps/Neologisms and Three Sentence-gaps

After receiving enough information about "lexical gaps and neologisms", subjects were asked to write six gaps/ neologisms (three English gaps and three Arabic gaps). In addition, they were asked to write an English sentence gap (modeling Chomsky's famous sentence along with an Arabic sentence gap). More than 90% of the subjects were successfully able to write gaps/ neologisms.

3.2.4 Giving New Senses to Existing Words

The "Washington Post" has an annual competition of getting its readers to provide new meanings of their own for existing words. Very interesting examples usually come up (one reader gave the word coffee the meaning "the person upon whom one coughs", another reader provided the meaning "appalled over how much weight you have gained for the word "flabbergasted".). Of course the newspaper may not have thought of the linguistic and pedagogical implications of this game and has organized the competition for the sake of sheer fun. Inspired by this competition, a few students were asked to think about selecting known words and give them new meanings. Like the Washington Post readers, some students, finding the game extremely funny and interesting, were able to provide interesting meanings.

Post-test Discussion of Lexical Gaps/Neologisms 3.2.5

After the classes and the pre-quiz discussion, students were once again involved in post-quiz discussion of the phenomenon under investigation. The deep discussion was prompted by theoretical questions such as: Why does the language contain such silences, in the first place? What does that imply for the nature of language knowledge, in general and morphological and syntactic knowledge, in particular?, How is it that speakers of a language could give existing words totally new meanings?, etc.

0 Results, Analysis and Discussion 4.

Results can be seen to disclose that the unique knowledge of and use of the linguistic gaps (lexical or sentence gaps) and neologisms raised language
awareness in the students, triggered their creative/critical thinking; causing them to view language a new and to rethink language learning and linguistic phenomenon, in general. Data collected via the phenomenological/retrospective methods have uncovered that most of the subjects having undergone the intensive consciousness experience of linguistic gaps and neologisms reported a change in the way they now look to language/language learning. Most of them (more than 90% of the subjects) reported an increasingly new and intensified awareness of the language property of "creativity" as well as having experienced a heightened sense of learner autonomy. This is particularly the case among those who were successfully able to write linguistic gaps/neologisms of their own or provide new meanings for existing words.

All things considered, the phenomenon of these innovative 'silences' (linguistic gaps and neologisms) appear to possess a host of theoretical and pedagogical implications in a variety of contexts:

**Implications for Language Theory, Language Learning and Learning Theory 4.1**

The very existence of the gaps/neologisms demonstrates that human learning, in general, and language learning, to be more specific, is much more complex than previously thought. Despite the obvious advances, we are still along way away from fully capturing the inner workings of the learning process (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987). This may provide further evidence to Chomsky's keynote theory of linguistic knowledge, (Chomsky, 1965, 1972, 1981, 1986; Meisel, 2011) (supporting the existence of Universal Grammar (UG), but would likewise unbutton a crying need for further interdisciplinary research in the learning theory that incorporates linguistics, language education and "cognitive science" (the latter is still largely unknown in Middle-eastern and African contexts). This would be one of the tendencies that this study suggests.

Meisel (2011) has argued that the key factors for the differences between L1 and L2 are due to the fact that the (LAD) does not operate in quite the same way in the two types of acquisition... although the working of the (LAD) cannot be held accountable for all observed L1-L2 differences, there are good reasons to believe that it is the single most important cause for both similarities and differences" (p. 202). The study of gaps and neologisms and their use by both L1 and L2 learners is, moreover, likely to contribute to Meisel's theory of the crucial role of the (LAD) in this respect. Additionally, it is likely to contribute to the discussion of the property of "recursion" (the ability to produce an infinite number of sentences/words out of a limited number of rules/patterns), which Hauser, Chomsky and Fitch (2011:14) hypothesise to be "the only uniquely human component of the faculty of language". The authors place a central role for this unique trait in the language system and language learning, assigning it to the narrow type of the 'language faculty' (FL) (they assume that there are two types of the language faculty "the broad type" (LFB), and the "narrow type" (FLN)). Undeniably, lexical gaps/neologisms are where this, arguably, unique characteristic of "recursion" operates in an almost ideal way.
Pedagogically speaking, the existence of these 'slots' might be exploited in quite a number of ways. Halliday's three categories of "learning language", "learning through language" and "learning about language", along with his related theory that language learning is much more than just learning a language; it is learning about learning itself, would need to be called forth again (see sections 2.3 & 2.4).

Modern communicative language teaching, which has been "a prevailing orthodoxy", since the early 1970s, to borrow Long's (1991, 2007) phrase, has so far apparently overlooked the incorporation of "language awareness" (learning about language), despite the new approaches such as "Whole Language", "Task-based teaching" and "Post-method") that generally call for a review of many classical and modern pedagogical orthodoxies. Long's "Focus-on-Form"( drawing students' attention to the "form", whilst operating in a communicative task/context) approach, could validly be seen as an attempt to rethink the "communicative" orthodoxy (or the many ways in which it has been misrepresented/misunderstood). Indeed, the pedagogical use of "linguistic gaps and neologisms" can serve as an active form of "Consciousness-raising task (CR)" as discussed in the introduction and detailed in section (2.4). More importantly, the study unveils that (CR) can also be extended to include consciousness of some aspects of the process of language learning per se.

The study of lexical gaps and neologisms can further enhance the new tendency to regard multilingualism/plurilingualism as a legitimate and useful resource for the EFL classroom/context ( recently TESOL quarterly has devoted a special issue for this topic entitled: Plurilingualism in TESOL, 2013). In this issue, L1s (contrary to the prevailing belief since the direct method in the 1940s), are particularly encouraged and increasingly drawn on for enriching the students' "multi/pluri-competences". Thus, Taylor and Snoddon (2013:440) conclude that " Plurilingualism in TESOL entails a paradigm shift that opens new approaches to understanding teaching and learning. Its status as a construct and practice that is a work in progress reflects its place in a time of paradigm shift, and is commensurate with its vision of language learners' linguistic repertoires as fluid and dynamic".

4.2 Implications for Future Research

Future research on the role of linguistic gaps and neologisms in language learning may benefit tremendously from mixing both qualitative and quantitative methods of data-collection and analysis (this study has drawn almost exclusively on qualitative/phenomenological methods, as gaps and neologisms are deemed lending themselves more easily for qualitative research than quantitative, and because there is a growing tendency in modern linguistic/social research to either draw on the qualitative methods or mix them with quantitative ones ). Finally, there are also many indications that the study of gaps and neologisms would reveal interesting facts about the role they may play in both the structure and function of a wide range of texts/discourses. More specifically, literary/narrative discourse ( classical examples utilizing gaps/neologisms include Carroll's and Twain's works), together with post-modern fiction, doubtlessly, provide rich data for
an analysis of gaps/neologisms. Besides, it is highly recommendable that further explorations of linguistic gaps and neologisms take into account the role these might play in "intertextuality" (the interrelationships between texts/discourses).

Summary and Conclusion 5.
The study of "linguistic lexical gasps" and "neologisms", in addition to being supremely interesting and a greatly virgin field, has got a huge potential for the theory of learning, language learning, cognitive science, cognitive linguistics and language pedagogy/education. A group of 50 college EFL majors were subjected to a heightened awareness experience of linguistic gaps and neologisms, and then later checked for how they view this experience using several qualitative (phenomenological) data-collection methods and analysis.

Findings can be shown to reveal that gaps and neologisms help raise linguistic awareness in the EFL students and urge them to think innovatively and creatively about language learning, through language learning and beyond language learning, as well. Relevantly and more precisely, gaps/neologisms could be used as an effective "consciousness-raising task", for developing and enhancing particular skills/features, together with developing learner sense of autonym, learner creativity and learner-centredness.

Besides, experiencing gaps/neologisms can further buttress the cognitive linguistic claims of Chomsky and other generativists (especially the claims for existence of UG/LAD). This is particularly so, because the phenomenon of linguistic gaps and neologisms appears to be universal, applying to all languages and all learners (it looks reasonable to assume that all normal humans, whether studying L1 or L2 are capable of producing and recognizing lexical gaps and neologisms in the language(s) they are learning/ have already learnt). Resultantly, the phenomenon is applicable to both L1 and L2 learners. The latter fact is important in two respects: contributing to theorization on the relationship between the acquisition of L1 and L2, on the one hand, and helping the ongoing quest for the LAD (Meisel, 2011), on the other (Saleemi, 1995). Simultaneously, these gaps and neologisms, would probably help enrich the debate about the validity of the "Complexity Approach" (viewing both language and learning as extremely complex, dynamic and multi-faceted systems), ventured by Larsen-Freeman and Cameron (2008). Hazndar's (2003) finding that the surface absence of verbal inflections in some L2 learners does not mean that their interlanguage system is, in itself, impaired, appears consistent with this complexity approach, implying in effect that the learners' ability to produce and recognize lexical gaps and neologisms, provides further evidence to the complexity approach of language and language learning.

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