



## Coping with Lexical Gaps: Use of Compensatory Strategies by Iranian EFL Students

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### Abstract

Learners of English as a non-native language unavoidably confront situations in which insufficiency of their linguistic knowledge presents them with difficulties. There are also cases in which the absence of some native-language lexical items in the target language is the source of problems the learners have to grapple with. This study focused on the phenomenon known as '*lexical gap*'. The aim was to identify and examine the use of compensatory strategies employed by Iranian EFL students in coping with lexical gaps. To this end, number of Iranian undergraduate EFL students were selected and then split into two groups of intermediate-level and advanced-level. Both groups were given two written tasks requiring them to introduce eight Farsi words with no English counterparts to a typical native speaker of English. The analysis of data revealed notable points, not least the employment of different compensatory strategies by members of both groups as well as the existence of some surprising differences between the frequencies of strategy use by the two groups.



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## Introduction

Different learners of foreign languages, including English, reach varying levels of language proficiency which often fall short of what is called 'native-like fluency'. What's more, there are a number of concepts and corresponding lexical items in some languages for which there are no target language counterparts or equivalents. So, apart from needing to find ways of making themselves understood and preventing communication breakdowns from happening despite their having deficient knowledge of foreign languages, learners also need to tackle a number of concepts and their corresponding words which exist in their L1s, but are absent in their L2s(English in the context of this study).

Given the fact that learners' knowledge, no matter how vast it might be, is often less than perfect on the one hand and the absence of some lexical items in some languages on the other, learners often have to resort to the use of 'compensatory strategies', which are different ways of making up for deficiencies in their foreign language knowledge (Kinbbeler(1989), (Block (2002) ). Since the focus of this study is on compensatory strategies in relation to a linguistic phenomenon known as 'lexical gap', the phenomenon needs to be defined and described here as well.

## Lexical Gap

The concept of 'lexical gap' has been defined by various experts and researchers. Gouws and Prinsloo(2005) have defined the term as a linguistic phenomenon which arises "where language lacks a word for a given concept"(p.159). A similar definition of the term has been put forward by Pearce(2012). According to him, a lexical gap denotes "the absence in a language of a word for an object or concept"(p.108).A rather more complex definition of the term has been cited by Fisiak(1980), who defined it as "a lack of a lexeme in a language L2 with respect to L1 lexeme within a given comparable field( p. 286 ).

What all the above-presented definitions show is that a lexical gap deals with the potentially problematic absence of a lexical item in a foreign language with which the learners/students grapple.

## Lexical Gap Versus Under-differentiation

One important point which needs to be highlighted here is that the linguistic phenomenon of 'lexical gap' should not be confused with a similar phenomenon known as 'under-differentiation'. Writing on this significant point, Coleman and Kay(2000) have pointed out that 'under-differentiation' means that a word is used in two or more different senses(i.e. senses for which separate words are used elsewhere in the same configuration), while 'lexical gap' points to a sense for which there is no word"(p. 5).

## Coping with Lexical Gaps

To cope with lexical gaps , as indicated previously, language learners often resort to the use of compensatory strategies. Campillo(2005) has provided illuminating information on compensatory strategies and the need for their deployment by learners;

This type of strategies are used to overcome troubles in the production of lexis, that is to say, the speaker wants to communicate an intended meaning but he/she has no word for it. Facing vocabulary deficiencies is a common situation in native speaker(NS)/ non-native speaker(NNS) or NSS/NSS conversations, where non-native speakers need to compensate for these deficiencies in order to achieve fruitful communication (2005, p.8).

## Previous Research on Coping with Lexical Gap

One area in which lexical gaps become particularly problematic is translation(Lyons (1981), Vossen(1998), Darwish(2010) ). To cope with lexical gaps in translation, writing and speaking, translators and learners resort to different compensatory strategies. Fase, Jaspaert and Kroon(1992) have listed some commonly-used strategies for dealing with lexical gaps. According to them, 'circumlocution', 'approximation', 'calque' and 'coinage' are among the most widely-used compensatory strategies for coping with lexical gaps.

A number of other previous studies have also focused on the examination of compensatory strategies such as 'circumlocution' and 'approximation' in dealing with lexical gaps by foreign learners and students of the English language.

Campillo(2006), whose study focused on the identification and analysis of lexical gap-filling compensatory strategies, has reported that the strategy of using circumlocutions has the highest frequency of use by learners of English. Liach (2010), who focused on the use of L1-based and L2-based lexical gap-filling strategies in the written performance of EFL learners, , has reported that as the learners go through different stages of language proficiency and hone their linguistic competence, they gradually move away from the use of L1-based strategies such as 'borrowings', 'coinages' and 'calques' and use more L2-based strategies including semantic and formal 'approximations', 'circumlocutions', and the employment of general words(2010).

Wongsawang(2001)'s study dealt exclusively with the identification and analysis of compensatory strategies used by another group of learners of English. His study's findings reveal that strategies of 'message



abandonment', 'topic avoidance', 'circumlocution', 'approximation', 'use of all-purpose words', 'word coinage', 'restructuring', 'code-switching' and 'mime' were all employed by participants of the study, whose level of English proficiency was between 'low' and 'intermediate'.

Wongsawang's study has also calculated and reported the frequencies of use of each of the foregoing strategies. According to the study's findings, 'circumlocution' and 'approximation' were the most frequently-used strategies by the study's participants, while 'message abandonment' and 'mime' were the least frequently-used strategies(2001).

As the literature, some highlights of which presented above, shows, the 'lexical gap' phenomenon is both problematical for learners and of considerable interest to researchers in the field of foreign/second language acquisition/learning. In fact, the examination of the phenomenon provides important insights into and information on the complex processes and strategies which learners utilize to cope with the foreign/second language/s they deal with. Given that the number of studies investigating the phenomenon in question is fairly limited, this line of research deserves more research attention, and it provides the rationale for the current research.

## **Purpose of the Study**

This study's principal aim is determining which compensatory strategies two groups of Iranian EFL students employ to cope with lexical gaps in their writing. Further, the study aims to identify the most frequently-employed compensatory strategies by the participants and then compare the findings with those of some recent studies on the same topic.

### **Research Questions**

- 1.What compensatory strategies do intermediate-level Iranian EFL students use to cope with lexical gaps in their two written tasks?
- 2.What compensatory strategies do advanced-level Iranian EFL students use to cope with lexical gaps in their two written tasks?
- 3.What is/are the most frequently-used compensatory strategies used by intermediate-level participants of the study?
4. What is/are the most frequently-used compensatory strategies used by advanced-level participants of the study?
- 5.Do advanced-level participants of the study make use of more L2-based compensatory strategies compared with intermediate-level participants?

## **Methodology**

### **Participants**

A total of 32 Iranian EFL students were included in this study. Half of them were studying TEFL at the Islamic Azad University of Najafabad and another half were studying the same field at Amin University, a non-governmental non-profit university in Fouladshahr, near the central Iranian city of Isfahan.

The study's participants were split into two groups, one intermediate and one advanced group. The criterion used to assign the participants to one of the foregoing groups was the length of their exposure to English at the tertiary level. Participants who were in the fourth term of their undergraduate TEFL studies were assigned to the 'intermediate' group and those were in the eighth and final term of their undergraduate TEFL studies were placed in the 'advanced' group.

The reason for having participants from two separate universities of Isfahan Province in the current study was having a diverse sample population representing students from two different universities.

In terms of students' gender, the vast majority of them(25 out of 32) were females between ages of 20 and 32. Male participants of the study were aged between 20 and 27 years.

Prior to the assignment of participants to intermediate and advanced groups, two of their previous term's professors who used to teach four key courses, Reading Comprehension(3) and Paragraph-writing(Basic Writing) to intermediate students, and Oral Reproduction of Stories and Reading English Newspapers to advanced students, were consulted by the researcher to make sure members of both groups were roughly at the same level in terms of their General English proficiency.

### **Materials**

To elicit the required research data from participants, the researcher needed a list of Farsi words with supposedly no English counterparts or equivalents. To draw up such a list, he first drew up a fairly long list of religious, cultural, culinary and political terms peculiar to Iran and its national language, Farsi. The terms included in the list were then examined in terms of their suitability for inclusion in research materials. After considering each term and consulting two professors of Contrastive Linguistics from Isfahan University, eight terms were selected for inclusion in the research.





Two of the selected terms were related to Islam, the state religion of Iran, two others dealt with Iranian marriage, two others were associated with Iranian foods and two others dealt with the Iranian political system.

Having decided about the terms, the researcher came up with ways through which to present the terms to participants of the study for data-collection purposes. To this end, he designed two separate written tasks. The first task required participants of both intermediate and advanced groups to introduce each of the eight terms to the target reader, a typical native speaker of English with no familiarity with the terms or the Persian language. The second task required the participants to write a short composition in which they were supposed to briefly introduce the eight terms to a typical target language reader.

So, three sets of materials were employed in the current study, a list of eight Farsi terms with no counterparts in English, a written task demanding that the participants introduce the eight terms to a foreigner and another written task demanding that the participants write short compositions introducing the eight terms to a foreigner.

## Procedures

After the assignment of participants to two separate groups, the researcher sought the help of their Writing and English Literature courses for the task of data-collection. The researcher originally had hoped he himself would be able to enlist the full cooperation of the participants. However, after facing problems such the lack of punctuality on the part of some of them, he decided to somehow link participation in the research with participants' regular academic work. After consulting the participants' professors, it was decided that intermediate students doing their Advanced Writing course would be given one extra point if they fully cooperated with the researcher. Also, it was decided that advanced students doing their Literature(2) course would be provided with one hour of free instruction on writing by the researcher in return for their full and willing cooperation.

The first phase of the study, which entailed the implementation of the first written task calling for the provision of information introducing each of the eight terms to a foreigner, was carried out on March 7<sup>th</sup> at Amin University and March 10<sup>th</sup> at the Islamic Azad University of Najafabad. The second phase of data-collection, which entailed the implementation of the second written task asking the participants to produce short compositions introducing the eight terms to a foreigner, was conducted a week after the carrying out of the first task on March 14<sup>th</sup> at Amin University and March 15<sup>th</sup> at the Islamic Azad University of Najafabad. After the implementation of the data-elicitation procedures, the collected data were analyzed and reported by the researcher.

## Data Analysis

For analyzing the collected data, the researcher took two successive steps. First, he carefully read all the pieces of writing produced by participants of both groups and identified the strategies they had used to accomplish the tasks' objective, introducing the eight Farsi terms with no English equivalent to a foreign reader.

After the identification of the strategies used and computation of their frequencies, the researcher focused on the use of each of the compensatory strategies by intermediate and advanced learners. The frequencies of strategy use were compared between members of intermediate and advanced groups and, using the results, the researcher tried to provide answers to research questions.

## Results

The tables below present numerical findings of the study.

Compensatory Strategy	Frequency
Code-switching	8
Calque	14
Coinage	22
Approximation	14
Circumlocution	21
Use of a general word	7

Table(1). List of compensatory strategies employed by intermediate-level participants and their frequencies of use on the first written task.



Compensatory Strategy	Frequency
Code-switching	5
Calque	17
Coinage	11
Approximation	19
Circumlocution	29
Use of a general word	6

**Table(2).** List of compensatory strategies employed by intermediate-level participants and their frequencies of use on the second written task.

Compensatory Strategy	Frequency
Calque	12
Coinage	5
Code-switching	6
Circumlocution	25
Approximation	23
Use of a general word	9

**Table(3).** List of compensatory strategies employed by advanced-level participants and their frequencies of use on the first written task.

Compensatory Strategy	Frequency
Coinage	5
Calque	16
Circumlocution	30
Approximation	21
Use of a general word	10

**Table(4).** List of compensatory strategies employed by advanced-level participants and their frequencies of use on the second written task.

Compensatory Strategy	Total Frequency
Coinage	33
Calque	31
Code-switching	13
Circumlocution	42
Approximation	33
Use of a general word	13

**Summary Table(1).** Total frequencies of all the compensatory strategies used by intermediate-level participants on the two tasks.



Compensatory Strategy	Total Frequency
Coinage	38
Calque	28
Code-switching	13
Circumlocution	72
Approximation	54
Use of a general word	23

**Summary Table(2). Total frequencies of all the compensatory strategies used by advanced-level participants on the two tasks.**

## Discussion and Conclusions

At the beginning of this part, research questions of the study need to be repeated. As mentioned earlier, the five questions which the current study seeks to answer are;

1. What compensatory strategies do intermediate-level Iranian EFL students use to cope with lexical gaps in their two written tasks?
2. What compensatory strategies do advanced-level Iranian EFL students use to cope with lexical gaps in their two written tasks?
3. What is/are the most frequently-used compensatory strategies used by intermediate-level participants of the study?
4. What is/are the most frequently-used compensatory strategies used by advanced-level participants of the study?
5. Do advanced-level participants of the study make use of more L2-based compensatory strategies compared with intermediate-level participants?

With respect to question number(1), as tables(1) and (2) illustrate, intermediate-level participants of the study utilized 'code-switching', 'coinage', 'calque', 'approximation', 'circumlocution', and 'use of a general word' strategies in the two written tasks they completed.

Although the participants deployed all of the six above-mentioned compensatory strategies, substantial frequency-related differences exist between the foregoing strategies. There are also numerical differences between the use of each of the strategies in the two separate tasks which the participants completed. As tables(1) and (2) show, intermediate participants made use of 'calque', 'approximation', 'circumlocution' strategies more frequently in the second task than they did in the first task. Also, they made use of 'code-switching', 'coinage' and 'use of a general word' strategies more frequently in the first task than in the second task. The most notable frequency-related differences can be observed in the use of 'coinage' 'circumlocutions' respectively(see tables(1) and (2) ).

As with the second research question, data presented in tables(3) and (4) help provide an answer. The two foregoing tables indicate that all the six strategies which intermediate-level participants used to accomplish the two tasks were used by advanced-level participants. However, there are two important points with regard to the strategy use by advanced participants which deserve mention here.

The first point is that, as table(3) shows, advanced learners made no use of the strategy of 'code-switching' in accomplishing the first task. But, they did use the strategy in question a substantial number of times in accomplishing the second task. The second point is that, as tables(3) and (4) illustrate, there are notable numerical differences associated with the frequencies of strategies' use by advanced participants. The most notable differences are related to strategies of 'coinage' and 'calque' respectively since advanced participants made use of the two strategies more frequently in the second task compared with their use in the first task.

Apropos of the third research question, as summary table(1) illustrates, the strategy of 'circumlocution' had the highest frequency of use(42) by intermediate participants of the study. Further, strategies of 'coinage' and 'approximation' had the same frequency of use(33) by the same group of participants.

As regards the fourth research question, as summary table(2) shows us, the strategy of 'circumlocution' had the highest frequency of use by advanced participants of the study(72), followed by the strategy of 'approximation', whose frequency of use by the same group of participants was 54.

As with the fifth and final research question, information presented in the two summary tables help provide an answer. L-2-based strategies of 'circumlocution', 'approximation' and 'use of a general word' were used by advanced-level participants of the study 72, 54 and 23 times respectively. Compared with the use of these strategies by the intermediate-level group, whose members made use of 'circumlocution', 'approximation' and 'use



of a general word' 42, 33 and 13 times respectively, it is clear that the three strategies had a notably higher frequency of use by members of the advanced group.

One curious point which the comparison of figures presented in the two summary tables brings to attention is that, surprisingly, advanced learners used the 'coinage' strategy more frequently than intermediate-level learners. Further, the number of times the strategy of 'code-switching' was used was the same (13) for both groups. This runs contrary to expectations and what the review of literature suggests because, as Llach has stated, as learners develop their foreign language proficiency, their use of L1-based strategies is expected to decline

(2010).

In conclusion, although this study has provided answers to the five questions it set out to investigate, it has also generated intriguing questions such as 'Why did advanced-level participants use lower-level strategies more frequently than expected?', 'Why did intermediate participants use both higher-level and lower-level compensatory strategies with somewhat similar frequencies?', and, more generally, 'How effective can the use of each of the six compensatory strategies by both intermediate and advanced learners be? These, along with similar questions which can be raised with respect to the use of compensatory strategies in learners' speaking performance need to receive research attention by prospective researchers.

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## Appendices

**Appendix(1).** Eight terms selected and included in the research for data-collection

امر به معروف و نهی از منکر-

خیرین مدرسه سازی-

مهریه-

مراسم عقد-





مجمع تشخیص مصلحت نظام-

هدفمندی یارانه ها-

خورش قیمه-

شله زرد-

**Appendix(2).** The first written task administered to the study's participants

Dear Participant,

The list below contains eight Farsi terms you are all familiar with. Try to introduce each term to a native speaker of English who is not familiar with any of them. Please keep your words brief and to the point. You should finish this task in 30 minutes.

Thanks for your cooperation!

امر به معروف و نهی از منکر-

خیرین مدرسه سازی-

مهریه-

مراسم عقد-

مجمع تشخیص مصلحت نظام-

هدفمندی یارانه ها-

خورش قیمه-

شله زرد-

**Appendix(3).** The second written task administered to the study's participants

Dear Participant,

Below you see eight Farsi terms. You are already familiar with them and have completed another task on them. In this task, you should introduce the terms to a native speaker of English who has no familiarity with the terms in a short composition.

You have 45 minutes to complete this task. Please keep your composition short and to the point.

Thanks for your cooperation!

امر به معروف و نهی از منکر-





خیرین مدرسه سازی-

مهریه-

مراسم عقد-

مجمع تشخیص مصلحت نظام-

هدفمندی یارانه ها-

خورش قیمه-

شله زرد-

