

# SHADOWING FOR LANGUAGE TEACHING

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In the past decades, shadowing has become quite popular in Japan and in other Asian countries. Recently it has finally caught the attention of researchers and language teachers in North America. The overarching purpose of this paper is to introduce shadowing for the sake of effective teaching. First, the basic idea of what shadowing is is explained. Then, shadowing in terms of listening practice will be discussed with its theoretical background, examples, and teaching tips. Next, shadowing as speaking practice, mainly for pronunciation development, will be discussed.

## What is Shadowing?

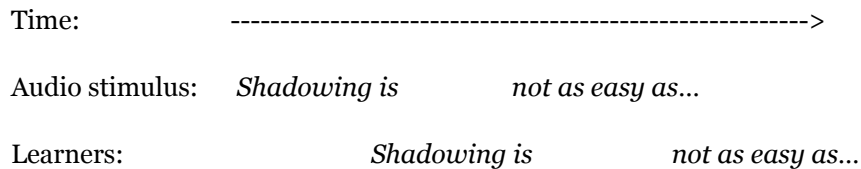
The basic definition of shadowing is “a paced, auditory tracking task which involves the immediate vocalization of auditorily presented stimuli” (Lambert, 1992, p. 266). The metaphor of shadowing is the shadow that follows you on a street late in the afternoon, copying your every move. Just like this, the shadowers (student) will shadow what they hear as simultaneously and accurately as possible. This is illustrated in Figure 1.

Time:	----->
Audio stimulus:	<i>Shadowing is not as easy as it seems.</i>
Learners:	<i>Shadowing is not as easy as it seems.</i>

**Figure 1. A schematic illustration of shadowing.**

As Figure 1 shows, as soon as students hear the first word, they start repeating it simultaneously, and keep doing so until the end of the text.

At a first glance, it seems to be similar to a repeating exercise. Because of the seemingly similarity, in western cultures, where repetitive trainings, with their association with the Audio Lingual Method, are avoided, shadowing is often not favored. However, the two practices are clearly different if you analyze them carefully. As Figures 1 and 2 show, the difference is that while shadowing requires students to repeat simultaneously, repetition does not require simultaneous repetition.



**Figure 2. A schematic illustration of repeating.**

Students' cognitive activities when working on repetition and shadowing are different. In shadowing, most of the students' attention is on catching the incoming sounds, so they may not access the meaning of each word they are listening to; in repetition, students typically access the meaning of each chunk. In other words, shadowing blocks learners from accessing meanings and directs most of their attention to the sounds (Kadota, 2007). Being an expert user of the language, you may be able to shadow and understand what you are shadowing simultaneously, but students often cannot, unless they are advanced.

## General Rules for Shadowing Use

Shadowing can serve both as practice for listening and for speaking, but there is a general rule: if the student lacks sufficient phoneme perception skills (i.e., the skill to recognize the sounds they are listening to), shadowing should be used only as listening practice (explained below); Once they are able to catch the sounds they are listening to or if the student already has good phoneme perception skills, shadowing can be used as a speaking activity. This is because shadowing is a cognitively complex and demanding task, so an attempt to “kill two birds in one stone” (i.e., attempting to improve both listening and speaking) has the risk of failing to catch one. Consequently, teachers need to know the students' level before implementing shadowing. Lastly, students should generally shadow without a written transcript of the audio stimulus. Shadowing while reading will change the cognitive process, in which they need to split their attention to sounds, letters, and meanings, so it becomes a different practice (see, however the section on IPA shadowing below).

## Shadowing for Listening

### Why is Shadowing for Listening Needed?

The common listening exercise often observed in classrooms is that students listen to a passage or conversation and answer comprehension questions, but this is often ineffective in helping students acquire a workable representation of the English phonological system. Those who lack the bottom-up listening skills for English, who struggle to perceive the sounds and recognize the words, will rely on their top-down skills, so their bottom-up

listening skills will often be slow to improve. Such an exercise will generally help students' top-down listening skills: use of background knowledge, helpful prediction, and effective note taking. In other words, typical listening exercises improve students' top-down listening skills, but their bottom-up listening skills remain immature, so such students need useful practice that develops their bottom-up listening skills specifically.

The primary role of shadowing for listening is to improve learners' phoneme perception skills. When shadowing, the students' attention is mostly on catching the sounds, not meanings, while when doing most common listening activities, their attention is typically on meaning and understanding what they are listening to. Put simply, when shadowing, students tend to process the audio stimulus by using bottom-up process more than top-down process. Therefore, through the repeated practice of shadowing, they eventually become better at catching the sounds (Hamada, 2016).

### How can we Use it in the Classroom?

There are five important rules to use shadowing as listening practice.

- First, because shadowing is demanding, both the teacher and the students should understand the mechanism and purpose of shadowing to keep students concentrated and motivated. Even in Japan, where students are accustomed to repetitive practice and shadowing is widely known, students eventually become tired and lose concentration as they practice. In cultures that are not used to repetitive practice in school, this may be a potentially serious problem. Students need to know what exactly they are practicing shadowing for.
- Second, shadowing should be used intensively for a short period of time only. Research shows a noticeable change in two 10–15 minute sessions a week for a month (Hamada, 2016). Even if students know why they are practicing shadowing, it is difficult for them to maintain motivation for the repetitive and demanding nature of shadowing. Once students acquire competent phoneme perception skills, they can work on other types of practice based on the acquired skill.
- Third, research shows that five or six repetitions of the same passage is enough (Shiki, Mori, Kadota, & Yoshida, 2010). Note that repetitions need not be consecutive, but once learners shadow the same texts five or six times in total, they should move on to a different text.
- Fourth, the source should match, as much as possible, the listening goal. For example, if their goal is to keep up with the natural speed of authentic English, the students should use the fastest source audio they can handle. Use of TV shows and radio news might be helpful. Occasionally, I have seen teachers use shadowing as pair work, in which one student shadows another. This style does not work as shadowing **for listening** because the source phonology is often very different from the target phonology.

- Lastly, students should understand the content of the target material before working on shadowing (Hamada, 2014), but the teacher should remind them to focus on the phonological features rather than meanings while shadowing. To focus on the phonological features exclusively, not the contents, they should know the contents beforehand. If they are asked to shadow an unknown story, it is too demanding and difficult because multiple processes in their brains will lead to cognitive overload.

### **Further Tips**

To make shadowing enjoyable, there are additional options that can add some spice. To check progress accurately, the use of an IC-recorder or a smartphone voice memo app is effective (Hamada, 2015). This way, students can check which words they were able to shadow at their own pace. Also, changing the speed of the audio stimulus would be another way to maintain their motivation. For example, by using [Audacity](#) (free audio recording and editing software), we can change the speed from faster to slower, or vice versa. Having them experience shadowing at 1.5x and then at the original speed, allows them to perceive the original speed as slower.

## **Shadowing for Speaking**

### **Why is Shadowing for Pronunciation Useful?**

In the area of speaking, shadowing contributes to students' pronunciation development. In fact, research on pronunciation is still younger than other areas, and development of effective teaching practice is expected. Recently, shadowing has started serving as a unique practice activity for learners' pronunciation development.

The mechanism that explains the contribution of shadowing to pronunciation skills is simple. In the process of copying the model as accurately as possible, students first attend to listening to the detailed features of the incoming sounds, including each phoneme, stress, intonation, and accents. Then, moving their muscle in their mouth, they reproduce them almost simultaneously and unconsciously. Repeating this process, their pronunciation features and fluency develop. Research shows that shadowing does help ESL advanced learners improve their pronunciation and fluency (Foote & McDonough, 2017).

### **How can we Use it in the Classroom?**

To use shadowing for pronunciation development, students need to know what exactly they are practicing shadowing for, distinguishing it from shadowing for listening. In shadowing for listening, their priority is to attend to the phonological information they are listening to, but in shadowing for pronunciation, they need not only to do so, but also to attend to their output. It is necessary to allocate their attention to both input and output.

Research has reported two ways of using shadowing for pronunciation and fluency development. First, Foote and McDonough (2017) report that advanced ESL learners'

pronunciation features improved when they shadowed TV shows (Foote & McDonough, 2017). In their research, shadowing was mainly used as homework assignments, but it can be used in a classroom as well. For example, each student chooses a short video such as a TED talk as a model and practices shadowing it at home. They then bring it to the classroom and perform in pairs or groups to receive feedback from their peers. They should also record their performance at the same time and review it together with the feedback. Any TV shows will work as long as the student is motivated to “speak” like the characters in the TV shows.

To use shadowing to improve students’ pronunciation at the segmental levels and fluency, there are two rules. First, students should find a model to copy and then practice shadowing to simulate the model the best they can. Feedback from peers and teachers will be of great help. Second, as repeatedly mentioned, the students need to have reached a high level of English proficiency, especially in listening. Since they need to copy the model stimulus exactly, checking and monitoring if they are actually copying it correctly by comparing the target voice (input) and their voice (output), they need to have “good ears” (phoneme perception skills).

### **IPA Shadowing**

The second way of using shadowing for pronunciation and fluency development is IPA shadowing (Hamada, 2015). In IPA shadowing, students are provided a transcript written in International Phonetic Alphabet before shadowing the material. Prior to or simultaneously, teachers need to teach how each IPA should be pronounced. This way, they attend to both the script and the audio stimuli, eventually matching their knowledge of IPA and its equivalent phonemic smoothly. In theory, IPA shadowing should raise students’ awareness of phonemic features, so segmental features of pronunciation will improve. Use of IPA transcript helps teachers give precise feedback. Also, recording and reviewing their shadowing performance with an IC-recorder will be effective in terms of teachers’ feedback and students’ self-regulated learning.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper, I explained the theoretical background of shadowing and its application in classrooms both for listening and pronunciation development. Shadowing has only been used for the past few decades in language teaching. I believe more students will benefit from shadowing, and more useful shadowing variations will be produced in the future. I hope this paper provides the foundation of the next steps of shadowing practice.

## References

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HAMADA Yo is an Associate Professor at Akita University. He majored in TESOL in Temple University, and earned a PhD from Hiroshima University. He has taught at several senior high schools and universities in Japan, and a graduate school in the U.S. His research interest covers listening, pronunciation, and motivation. He has published a number of articles and books. The recent book he published is *Teaching EFL learners shadowing for listening: Developing learners' bottom-up skills*.