

# Shadowing: A Technique for Language Learning and a Tool for Critical Reflection

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## **ABSTRACT**

Shadowing is a technique whereby a teacher reads the text aloud while the students concurrently listen to and/read the text while replicating it. This approach can help second and foreign language learners improve their speaking, listening and reading skills (Hamada, 2009; Miyake, 2009; Nakanishi & Ueda, 2011; Omar & Umehara, 2010). This technique can be easily and frequently practiced in any activity that has text. In this study, qualitative and quantitative data from student surveys was collected about the effectiveness of shadowing with most students agreeing that shadowing was beneficial to the development of their English skills. In addition, from the perspectives of teachers' professional development, shadowing was also found to be beneficial for the development of the EFL practices and as an approach to critical reflection.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Shadowing is a technique that develops the language-learner's listening, speaking and potentially reading skills simultaneously as the learner repeats the text as soon as he or she hears it spoken by a speaker or from an audio recording (Hamada, 2009; Nakanishi & Ueda, 2011). Implementing shadowing in EFL lessons aids in providing students with a way to improve their English skills and personally has assisted me to critically reflect as an English-language instructor and Japanese-learner. As a teacher, implementing the technique in the final year of my five-year period as an English Discussion Class (EDC) instructor prompted me to examine my philosophy and practice, exploring how shadowing exemplifies both of these themes. In this paper I will provide an overview of shadowing and describe its relevance in an EFL context; in addition to discussing how shadowing was a tool for reflection as my five-year contract in my current position concludes.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

This section will define shadowing, present a model for practice, and discuss its advantages and disadvantages. Shadowing is when a learner hears a text and repeats it aloud as soon as it is heard. Omar and Umehara (2010) stress that "shadowing' is a high cognitive action rather than a mere automatic memory action or parroting" (p. 204). Furthermore "[i]t requires listening and speaking competencies to function at the same time in order to be effective in improving his/her skills in listening comprehension, speaking, and conversational activity" (Omar & Umehara, 2010, p. 205). Thus shadowing differs from the teacher reading and then the students simply repeating. Though numerous models and variations of shadowing exist in the literature, Omar and Umehara (2010, p. 212) adapted a model from Hayakawa (2004) which outlines a ten-step process starting with an examination of the text, shadowing variations with and without the text, a shift in focus from meaning to speech reproduction, recording the output and a reflection about shadowing. However, in this paper I will highlight the two steps set out by Omar and Umehara (2010) that seem to be most beneficial to my current context, teaching academic discussion skills to first-year students. Firstly, the instructor reads the text or an audio recording is played and students say the text back as they listen to and read the text. This step of shadowing uses the text with a focus on understanding the words. Secondly, the instructor reads the text or an audio recording is played and students say the text back as they listen without using the text. This step of shadowing has a focus on replicating the pronunciation and intonation. These steps will be further discussed in the following section.

The advantages of shadowing are related to the development of foreign or second language skills. Shadowing may improve the language learner's speaking, reading and listening skills (Tamai, 1997 as cited in Hamada, 2009, p. 7). Omar and Umehara (2010) state that, "improvement as a result of using shadowing techniques in classroom instruction can be seen in four main areas, namely: changes in the natural rate of speech, comprehension, involvement in shadowing, and confidence in each cycle" (p. 222). Another advantage is that "the learners' speech perception will be automatized, enabling learners to increase the amount of phonological information held in the short-term store" (Hamada, 2009, p. 1). The disadvantages are related to the technique's complexity and a lack of research. Because of the immediacy of shadowing - as soon as the verbal sequence is heard it must be articulated - the technique is challenging (Miyake, 2009). In addition, limited studies have been carried out into shadowing in English language learning which is another disadvantage (Miyake, 2009). Nakanishi and Ueda (2011) recommend that more research is needed to more clearly define what activities are considered to be shadowing as well as its effectiveness. If little research exists about shadowing's effectiveness in language learning, in addition to the uncertainty of its practice, many teachers may be reluctant to use the technique. Regardless of the disadvantages, using shadowing in EFL classes can be done easily as this study will demonstrate and can provide positive results

### **SHADOWING IN AN EFL CONTEXT**

English Discussion Class (EDC) is a mandatory EFL class for all first-year students at Rikkyo University and follows a strongly unified curriculum. The classes have a small number of approximately eight students creating a strong learner-centered focus. The textbook all the instructors and students use has 13 lessons with each lesson having approximately six target language phrases. The target language for each lesson assists learners in clearly marking their ideas in discussions such as opinions and reasons phrases ("In my opinion,...", "One reason is...", etc.) and to assist with all-English utterances such as checking for understanding and paraphrasing ("Do you follow me?", "Do you mean...?", etc."). Furthermore each lesson of the textbook has a short reading about the lesson's topic and practice activities to prepare students for two discussions to help with English content creation.

In the second half of my fourth year teaching discussions, I began to incorporate shadowing into every lesson for the majority of the activities which use the textbook. As a Japanese-language learner I had experienced the benefits of shadowing in my own self-study specially in regards to my increased listening, speaking and reading skills. During the first half of my fifth year teaching the class, I often talked about shadowing specifically when I presented the lesson's target language. However, as I learned from a former colleague, some confusion of shadowing as chorus reading and other techniques, lead me to decrease my usage of the word "shadowing" in the second half of my fifth year.

To more objectively observe shadowing, in the first half of my fifth year, I decided to videotape one class to document how shadowing could be incorporated into the lessons, in addition to assisting in my observation of the students' performance of the technique. Using the video as a source, the following table lists all the activities shadowing was applied to and the duration. All the activities were used in nearly every lesson and with each class throughout my fifth year.

Table 1. Shadowing Activities and Duration

Activity	Description of Texts Used for Shadowing	Duration
1	The lesson's activities schedule	14 sec
2	A practice activity with four questions to create discussion content	16 sec
3	The target language (6 phrases) – 1 <sup>st</sup> time focusing on meaning	11 sec
4	The target language (6 phrases) – 2 <sup>nd</sup> time focusing on pronunciation	7 sec
5	The target language (6 phrases) – 3 <sup>rd</sup> time focusing on listening and speaking	7 sec
6	The target language (6 phrases) – time 4 <sup>th</sup> focusing on listening and speaking	6 sec
7	The student-generated answers to activity 3 along with the target language	27 sec
8	An explanation to the benefits of using the target language	10 sec
9	The answers to a fill-in-the blank practice activity	42 sec
10	The first discussion's preparatory activity's instructions and prompts	32 sec
11	The first discussion's questions	7 sec
12	The second discussion's preparatory activity's instructions and prompts (with time allocated for students to select their answers)	65 sec
13	The second discussion's questions	9 sec
TOTAL TIME		253 sec/ 4 min 13

Except for activities five and six, all shadowing activities allowed students to look at the texts as they listened to me read. As a result the students simultaneously practiced English reading, listening and speaking skills. The shadowing of the target language (activities three to six), were given the most awareness about shadowing as the following prompts were used before the activities started:

Activity 3: "When we say the words, think about what they mean."

Activity 4: "When we say the words, focus on the way we say the words; in other words, our pronunciation."

Activities 5 and 6: "Close your eyes and as soon as you hear the words say them. This will help train your speaking and listening skills at the same time."

Shadowing is not a time-consuming technique as the total time over the ninety-minute lesson for all the activities was approximately four minutes. As such, it can easily be incorporated into lessons providing all students with the opportunity to use English and develop multiple skills. Observing the videotaped lesson of the seven-student class revealed that most students could keep up with the pacing of my readings and most were successful in replicating a pronunciation and intonation similar to mine. However, not all students could always accomplish this for all 13 activities and would either be silent or noticeably mumble the text and/or omit words. Furthermore, in activities five and six, it appeared that a few students continued to look at the text, thereby limiting the opportunity for them to focus more concretely on developing their listening skills.

Also after these activities finished, I often commented that it was difficult to do shadowing without relying on text to reassure the students that the technique was challenging.

### DATA ANALYSIS

In order to gauge students' perceptions of shadowing in their classes, an in-class survey was carried out with 19 students over three classes. Respondents were required to choose from a four-point Likert scale of strongly agree, agree, disagree and strongly disagree. This survey sought to discover the students' opinions about shadowing in relation to the improvement of their speaking, listening and reading skills as well as the shadowing's level of difficulty. A more comprehensive analysis of these surveys is the focus of another paper (Arthurson, in press). However, as this current paper is comprised of a critical reflection, only an analysis of the quantitative data of students' responses will be discussed. The video observation will also be referenced.

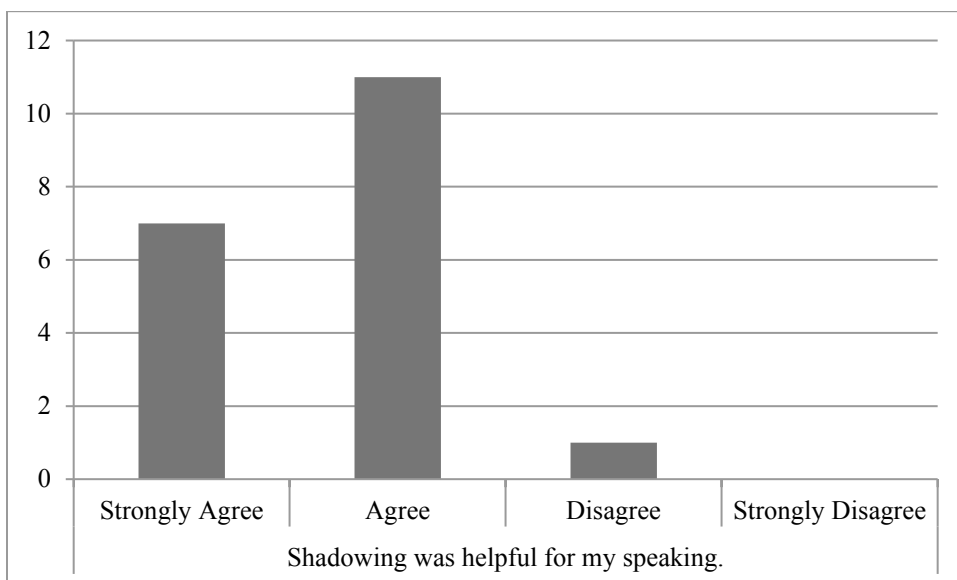


Figure 1. Shadowing and Speaking

The above data shows that 18 out of 19 students either agreed or strongly agreed that shadowing was helpful for their speaking skills. For a discussion class, using shadowing may benefit students by giving them more repetition of and confidence with discussion and communication skills, as well as other vocabulary and text sequences found in the textbook. As a result, students may have more success in their English fluency in discussions because of practicing shadowing due to the increase verbal output.

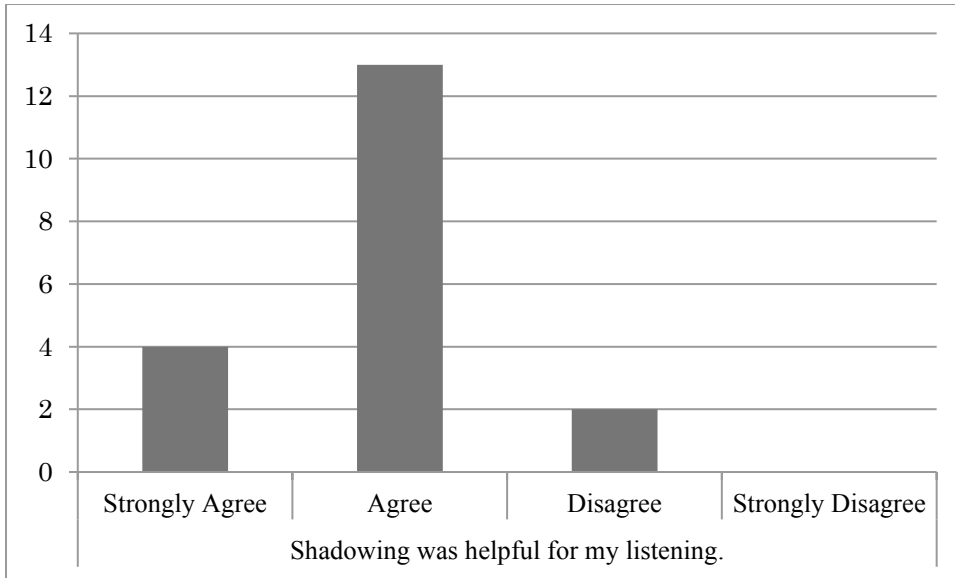


Figure 2. Shadowing and Listening

The above data shows that 17 out of 19 students either agreed or strongly agreed that shadowing was helpful for their listening skills. Furthermore, students can become more accustomed to the instructor's style of language as it is necessary for them to focus on reproducing the style while they shadow. Having more opportunities to listen to language may aid in learners more quickly and easily comprehending when the language is used by other students in discussions and other lesson activities.

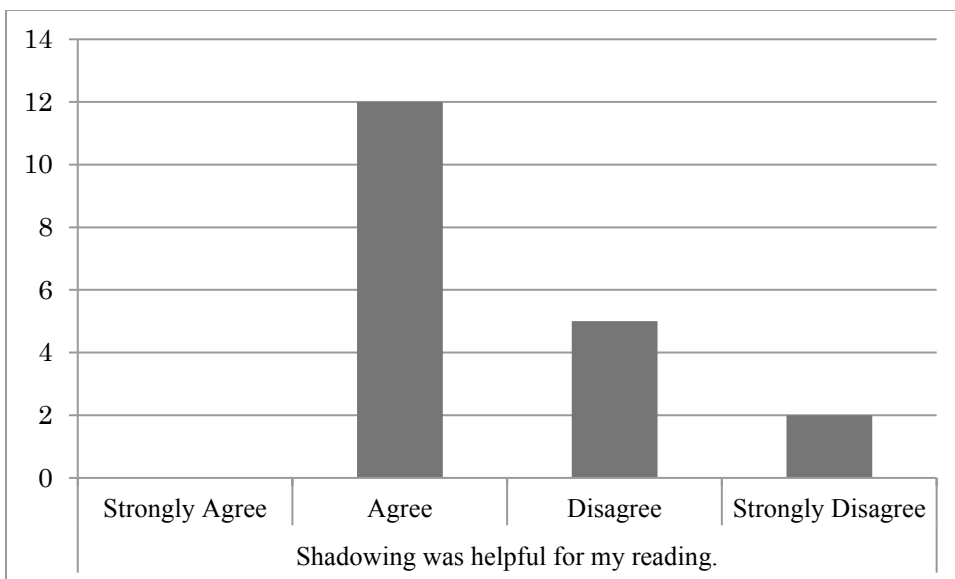


Figure 3. Shadowing and Reading

The above data shows that 12 out of 19 students agreed that shadowing was helpful for their

reading skills. It seemed that though text was predominately used in shadowing in the lessons, the learners may have had difficulty connecting shadowing with this skill. However, in the final lesson of fall 2018, I could not join in the practice of shadowing with one lower-intermediate class. During this lesson I observed that without my reading of the texts the students read at a pace comparable to my own usual pacing. This surprised me as this class tended to be quite slow in their speaking, discussion pacing and fluency-building activities, leading me to consider that their reading skills may have improved due to shadowing. Perhaps, without the objective position that I had as I was not actively taking part in shadowing, it may have been difficult for students to perceive the improvements in their reading skills.

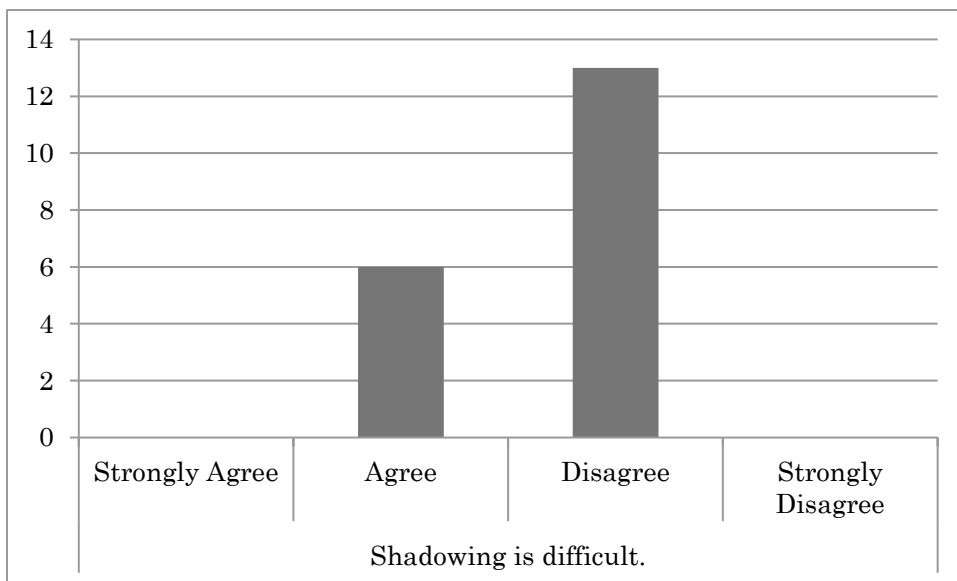


Figure 4. Shadowing’s Difficulty

The above data shows that only six out of 19 students agreed that shadowing was difficult. The literature often states that shadowing is very challenging; however, the majority of shadowing was done with texts which decreased the level of difficulty. Also since I gave students no feedback about their performance when shadowing, this could have made some students feel that it was easier to do because no critique was provided.

## REFLECTION

As this is my final year as an instructor with the EDC program, I will conclude this paper with a critical reflection on my practice and philosophy over the five-year period at EDC; in addition to how shadowing is representative of my beliefs about learners’ ownership and practical usage of the language being studied. According to Farrell (2015) “critical reflection encompasses the whole being of the teacher—the contemplative, reflective, cognitive, emotional, ethical, moral, social, and political aspects of our professional (and personal) lives” (p. 95). In my own self-reflection in 2014, I wrote “my teaching beliefs were formed through mentorship from Japanese Teachers of English (JTEs) with a focus on the practical application of English and my own language study of Japanese” (Arthurson, 2014, p. 3). As a graduate of social work, I have always been aware of how the whole of a person influences every part of his or her identity. Perhaps in the role of teacher I always need to be reminded of my experiences as a student. Currently, though my beliefs are no

longer influenced by those JTEs, I still feel that my philosophy and practice is shaped by practical application as my use of shadowing stemmed from my Japanese-language study. When I utilized shadowing as a Japanese-language learner, using a CD and textbook, I soon noticed an improvement in my listening, speaking and reading skills as my comprehension and speed increased. This success prompted me to incorporate shadowing into EFL teaching.

My reflection at the end of the first half of my first year with this program also discussed using chorus reading as a way to build community and to give students more ownership of the language being taught as I did not take part in that activity. In retrospect, though it was a communal activity, I am uncertain if chorus reading had such an improvement on their speaking, listening and reading skills as shadowing does. Thus, I became interested in using shadowing to provide my students with not only an opportunity to improve their English skills but to build a sense of community as it was an activity all students and the instructor could participate in. However, this study's limitations are that a small sample size was used and it was difficult for me to observe to what extent the students were shadowing or to how accurately the technique was being practiced. Nonetheless, shadowing has been a practical and empowering way to acquire a language mirroring my language teaching and learning practice and philosophy.

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