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Shadowing: A useful pronunciation practice activity

What is shadowing?

Shadowing is a pronunciation practice technique that has been around for many years. It is a little bit like a listen and repeat exercise, but rather than having learners hear a model speaker and then repeat what they heard afterwards, learners are encouraged to follow the speaker as closely as possible with only a very short delay. This means that the model speaker and the learner will be speaking at the same time. Learners are usually encouraged to mimic the speaker's speech style as much as possible, using the same rhythm, stress, intonation, etc. Interestingly, shadowing for language learning was first popularized in Japan, where it was already being used as a (somewhat controversial) technique for training simultaneous interpreters (Bovey & Stewart, 2009). Shadowing shares some properties with mirroring, and these two terms are sometimes used interchangeably, although they are quite distinct techniques. Mirroring includes imitation of physical gestures and does not require simultaneous production of speech (Meyers, 2013) (See the Mirroring description on this website).

What are the benefits of Shadowing?

Even though this technique has been used for a long time, it has only been in the last decade that it has attracted attention from researchers. While more research is needed fully understand how shadowing affects pronunciation, the research that has been conducted to date has been promising, showing improvements in different aspects of pronunciation (e.g., Bovee & Stewart, 2009; Hsieh, Dong, & Wang, 2013; Mori, 2011; Rongna & Hayashi, 2012). Shadowing has also been shown to improve overall comprehensibility (Foote, 2017). Furthermore, several studies have demonstrated that shadowing can enhance learners' listening comprehension (Bovee & Stewart, 2009; Hamada, 2014).

In terms of practicality, shadowing has a number of benefits for both instructors and students. First, shadowing allows students to practice many features of pronunciation at the same time. This makes it a good activity in class where students' pronunciation difficulties differ. It also works very well as a homework activity with minimal preparation needed on the part of the instructor.

How do learners feel about shadowing?

One concern teachers may have is that shadowing could be boring and repetitive for learners. It sounds dangerously similar to audiolingualism and it has been argued that shadowing is merely "vocalized repetitions and only results in meaningless parrot-like practice" (Bovee & Stewart, 2009, p. 20). However, studies investigating learners' opinions about shadowing have found that, while not everyone loves it, most students feel positive about doing shadowing activities and feel that it is beneficial for their pronunciation (Bovee & Stewart, 2009; Foote, 2017). In a study by Foote (2017), 16 language learners practiced shadowing outside of class for 8 weeks. They had to practice 4 times a week for at least 10 minutes each time. The participants were asked about

their overall opinions using 9-point scales. In response to “How much do you like the shadowing activity?” participants rated it at 7.6 out of 9 on average (where 9 equals a positive response), and in response to the question “How much do you think it is helping your pronunciation?” they rated shadowing at 7.5.

What are some tips for employing the shadowing technique?

There are many ways that shadowing can be used in or outside of class. Here are some tips for making it effective and relevant for learners.

- 1) Have students record themselves while practicing. The instructor can then use the recordings to give them feedback, to have them analyze their own errors, or to have them work in groups to give feedback.
- 2) Choose speech models that are appropriate for the students. In an EAP class, instructors may want to have students work with a more formal presentation, such as shadowing part of a TED Talk. For low level learners, choose recordings that are simple and not too fast, while for high proficiency students, clips from TV shows or movies may be appropriate. Students can also be assigned dialogues to shadow and then act out as a role play. Meyers (2013) advocates having students choose their own speech models (high proficiency and highly comprehensible non-native speakers are good choices).
- 3) The shadowing stimulus should not be too long. By giving students clips that are reasonably short (1-3 minutes) they can practice repeatedly and work to improve their performance each time.
- 4) Provide scripts for students to make it easier for them to follow along with the speaker.
- 5) If shadowing is assigned as homework, demonstrate how to shadow a speech model in class, and have students practice in class at least once. Students can then hand in their recording homework, or perform shadowing in class without the speech stimulus playing.
- 6) Encourage learners to mimic the speaker as closely as possible. If they are simply saying the words, it is less likely to be helpful. They should attend closely to the pronunciation of the speaker.

Shadowing is a very adaptable activity and can work with a wide range of learners. It is also a good activity to suggest to learners who ask for extra help with their pronunciation.

References

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