

Research Summary

Who Benefits from Shadowing and How?

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What is this study about?

Shadowing is a listening teaching technique used to enhance students' ability to distinguish speech sounds (i.e. phoneme perception). In shadowing training, learners reproduce the speech they hear simultaneously or after a pause. Previous studies indicated that shadowing is particularly effective for low-proficiency learners. In addition, if learners' first and target languages have greater differences in phonological systems, shadowing becomes difficult but still effective. Since there are few empirical studies available, this study aimed to examine whether learners can improve their phoneme perception and comprehension skills after receiving shadowing training as well as whether only low-proficiency learners can benefit from shadowing training.

What did the researcher do?

The researcher implemented shadowing lessons in a compulsory English class at a Japanese university. The participants were 43 freshmen and they received shadowing training nine times during the one-month study. After 50–60 minutes of introducing the lesson content, the teacher gave shadowing training to the students for 15–20 minutes. The shadowing instruction procedure is as follows: 1) Listening to a passage and completing a comprehension test; 2) silent shadowing without reading; 3) shadowing while reading; 4) checking one's understanding of the text; 5) shadowing; 6) reviewing the text; 7) content shadowing concentrating on shadowing and the meaning; and 8) listening to the passage. To examine the effectiveness of shadowing, pre- and post-tests were conducted. Regarding phoneme perception, students answered dictation questions, which consisted of 20 fill-in-the-blank questions for function words (e.g. "a" and "the"). To measure listening comprehension skills, students answered multiple choice questions from the Eiken test (a standardized English test in Japan), including both high-school- and university-level items. In order to analyze the effect, the researcher divided the participants into two groups, low-proficiency and intermediate, based on their Eiken test score from the pre-test.

What did the researcher find?

The results showed both groups improved their scores in the phoneme perception test. In terms of listening comprehension skills measured by the Eiken test, the low-proficiency group increased their test score in the high-school-level questions, but not for the intermediate-proficiency group. Furthermore, neither group showed significant improvement in university-level questions. While the intermediate level learners were already equipped with the skills to answer the high-school-level questions, low-proficiency learners reached the initial level of the intermediate-level group through shadowing training. Thus, low-proficiency learners benefited more from the shadowing lessons than their intermediate-level counterparts.

Practical implications/significance

This study showed that shadowing can effectively improve learners' phoneme perception irrespective of listening proficiency level but benefit low-proficiency learners more. Additionally, shadowing could be particularly effective for learners whose first and second languages have fewer shared phonological rules.

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