

Exploring the Impacts of Shadowing Technique on Vietnamese EFL Learners' Pronunciation

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Abstract: *The study explored some EFL teachers' application of shadowing technique in teaching English and its impacts on English as a foreign language (EFL) students' pronunciation at Thai Nguyen University (TNU). A six-week action research was conducted with the participation of 27 freshmen from an English class. During the time of the study, students received a number of sound files and were required to practice shadowing technique when listening to the files. Frequent voice records were requested to make sure that students follow the teachers' instructions. Pre-test and post-test were delivered with the results analyzed and compared to evaluate the impacts of shadowing practice on students' pronunciation. Post-intervention questionnaires were also conducted to investigate students' attitudes towards the effects of shadowing technique on their English pronunciation. The outcomes of the study showed that frequent shadowing practice made students' English pronunciation improve.*

Key Word: *Shadowing, shadowing technique, teaching English pronunciation, action research*

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I. Introduction

Pronunciation is one of the main emphases of English language teaching and learning. According to Paulston & Burder (1976), pronunciation is the production of a sound system which does not interfere with communication either from viewpoint of the speakers or the listeners. Harmer (2001) emphasized that the most important purpose of language teaching and learning is to enable students to communicate in the target language. For oral communication, pronunciation is an important element since incorrect pronunciation of the language sounds probably leads to misunderstanding and communication breakdown. Obviously, intelligible pronunciation makes communication possible and gives English language learners the communicative empowerment - effective language use that enables them to become communicative and confident users of spoken English. It cannot be denied that pronunciation should be one of the key elements of language teaching in general and English language teaching in particular.

At the researchers' universities, EFL learners at all levels are required to take the final exams for all English courses in the form of oral tests. From this experience, the researchers found that a great number of students had serious problems with their pronunciation. Though they knew the words, their low quality pronunciation prevented them from being understood. Driven by this, the researchers searched for some possible techniques in teaching with a view to helping students' pronunciation improve. Shadowing technique was selected thanks to its potentials to make the difference. Then, the researchers conducted a small-scale research on 27 ELF students who were freshmen in one of their classes.

II. Literature Review

Aspects of pronunciation

Pronunciation has a number of components, including the sounds (vowels and consonants), the combinations of sounds, linkage of sounds, word stress, rhythm, sentence stress and intonation (Kenworthy, 1987). In this study, the authors could not investigate and evaluate all aspects of pronunciation; therefore, their focus was put on impacts of shadowing practice on the pronunciation of individual words, word stress and sentence stress, and intonation since these aspects are frequently described as criteria to assess pronunciation ability in the marking scales of popular English proficiency tests in Vietnam such as IELTS or VSTEP.

Shadowing technique

According to Hamada (2015), while shadowing was initially intended to teach beginning interpreters, it is now more crucial for EFL students to enhance their speaking and listening skills. Tamai (1997), referenced in

Hamada (2016), described it as an active and highly cognitive action in which students monitor the speech they hear and vocalize it as clearly as possible while listening. In other words, the shadowing technique involves having the listeners repeat or produce speech that they hear right away with only a very short delay (Hiramatsu, 2000; Schweda-Nicholson, 1990). Students that use the shadowing technique repeat the speakers' words or phrases. Mumbling, synchronized reading, prosody shadowing, and content shadowing are also listed as other types of the shadowing method (Tamai, 2005).

Lin (2009) as cited in Kou and Chou (2014: 18) did a research with Taiwanese EFL junior high school students and concluded that shadowing could help her students improve their pronunciation as well as self-confidence. This finding is similar to that of Salim, A., Terasne., & Narasima, L. (2020), who conducted an experimental research in a senior high school in Indonesia. 70 students were participants in their research, half belonged to the experimental group who received the treatment of shadowing technique, while the others did not. Interviews, multiple-choice tests, and records were their data collection instruments. Descriptive and T-test analysis was used to find the ways students learned and the results. Their study showed that shadowing technique not only helped students improve their pronunciation, but also levelled up students' motivation for learning. Bovee and Stewart (2009) also had learners engage in shadowing activities as homework assignments, in which students were asked to complete their assignments at home using their computers. The researchers reported that roughly 70% of respondents thought their pronunciation of individual words and intonation had improved. They also pointed out some challenges in completing the assignments. The practice was complained as too time-consuming for students. Foote, J.A and McDonough, K. (2017) also had a research to investigate the impacts of shadowing on their 22 second language (L2) learners. The participants of their study used iPods which were loaded with eight audio dialogues for use in eight weeks. A booklet with all necessary instructions were delivered to students to make sure they knew what they were expected to do. After the study, the researchers confirmed that shadowing showed "promise as a way to help learners improve their pronunciation and fluency" (Foote, J.A & McDonough, K., 2017, p.52). In an article published on www.pronunciationforteachers.com, Foote (2017) suggest some tips for successful application of shadowing techniques. The tips include allowing students to record themselves while practicing, choosing appropriate models, providing not too long shadowing stimulus (the sound files given to students), providing scripts and encouraging students to mimic the speaking as closely as possible.

III. Research method

Research design and procedures

This research followed action research design, in which the researchers were also the teachers of the class and the aim of the study was to find solutions to deal with a problem raising in their own classroom.

Recognizing that their students had an array of problems in pronunciation of the English sounds, which made their speaking really difficult to understand, the teachers researched the possible effective ways to teach pronunciation and decided to use shadowing technique in teaching in order to help their students' pronunciation get better. This study explored the potential impacts of the shadowing practice on their EFL students' English pronunciation. As an action research, the teachers went through a cycle of typical action research process with four steps suggested by Kemmis (1991), as presented below.

Step 1: Plan

- ✓ The two teachers worked together to design a detailed plan for the inclusion of shadowing technique in their teaching of pronunciation.
- ✓ All the necessary materials were well prepared in advance for the use of the shadowing technique in teaching pronunciation to their students, including brief explanation about the technique, instructions for students, teachers' requirements, the audio files to be used as shadowing stimulus and tapescripts, the sample of learning journals for students self-recording of their learning, the pretest, posttest and marking criteria, and all other related documents.
- ✓ Pretest was delivered to get initial information about some main characteristics of students' pronunciation.
- ✓ Training was delivered to students before the shadowing technique intervention to make sure they understand all the requirements, timelines, procedures and also know how to use some mobile or computer apps to record their voices.

Step 2: Act

- ✓ Shadowing technique was applied to the teaching of pronunciation.
- ✓ Each week, the teachers send one audio file as shadowing stimulus and its tapescript to the class for their shadowing practice. Students worked with the file from the beginning to the end of the week and only got the second sound file in the following week. For each file, students had to listen and shadow the audio file following the tapescript at least one a day within 7 days. They were asked to imitate all the pronunciation features of the audio file including pronunciation of individual sounds, linking, word

stress, sentence stress and intonation. Each week, students had to record their voice for the first and last time of shadowing practice and send their recordings to the teachers. Students also needed to fill their learning journals about the time they practiced each day. They were also asked to submit their journals to teachers.

Step 3: Observe

- ✓ The teachers used a number of tools (observation, tests, questionnaire) to get information about the potential impacts of the shadowing technique on their students' pronunciation.

Step 4: Reflect

- ✓ The data collected was analyzed. Evaluation of the use of shadowing technique, its impacts on students' pronunciation and implications on how to make use of the technique for better teaching were made.

Participants

The study was conducted with the participation of 27 EFL students in the same class, aged from 18-19, who were freshmen at a university in Vietnam. Their major was not English and their English level at the time of this study was mainly elementary.

Data collection and analysis

Pre-test and posttest, respectively delivered before and after the intervention period, and structured questionnaires were the main sources of data. The pretest was delivered to assess students' pronunciation and get initial information about some main characteristics of students' pronunciation before the intervention period. The posttest was distributed after the study period also to assess students' pronunciation performance. The results of the pretest and posttest scores then were compared to investigate any changes in students' pronunciation characteristics, which could be the indicators for the impacts of the shadowing practice.

Both pre-test and post-test had two parts. In part 1, students were required to read aloud a passage. The second part was a short questions-and-answers session in which the interlocutors asked and students answered five or six questions about one or two very familiar topics. The aims of this part was only to encourage students to speak so the questions were designed carefully in accordance with students' level in order not to make any challenges for them to understand. Through these two parts, students' pronunciation characteristics were assessed in terms of the overall comprehensibility, the clarity, frequency and accuracy in word stress, sentence stress and intonation. The marking scale was adopted and adapted by the teachers following the speaking marking scale of the Vietnam Standardized Test of English Proficiency for Level 3-5 (VSTEP 3-5), with the score ranges from 1 to 10 for each element. The marking scale of this test was chosen thanks to its detailed description of pronunciation features for each band in the scale. Pretest and posttest results were then compared to look for any significant differences in students' pronunciation before and after the intervention.

Post questionnaires were also distributed after the intervention period to investigate students' attitudes towards the effects of shadowing technique in teaching pronunciation. The post questionnaire had three items, with the first one designed to get information about students' evaluation of the effectiveness of the shadowing technique. The second one was to get to know their self-evaluation of their own pronunciation aspects after the intervention. The final question was to investigate the problems students encountered when following the shadowing instructions.

IV. Findings

Pretest and posttest scores regarding students' pronunciation before and after the intervention period are presented in the table below.

Table 1: Students' pronunciation pretest and posttest results

	Number	Min	Max	Average
Pretest score	27	3	5.5	3.9
Posttest score	27	3.5	7	4.8

The statistics in table 1 have shown that there was a difference in the posttest score compared to the pretest score, with a raise of 0.9 from 3.9 to 4.8 on average. The highest score of the pretest was only 5.5 while that of the post test was 7. The lowest score students got for the pretest was 3 but there was a slight increase of the minimum posttest score, which was 3.5. This implied that shadowing technique had somehow made the pronunciation ability of all students in the class change in the positive direction.

In terms of how shadowing practice affected the different aspects of pronunciation assessed through the test, the average test scores presented in table 2 below will illustrate this.

Table 2: Pretest and posttest results of students' pronunciation aspects

Aspects	Number	Average pretest score	Average posttest score	Deviation
Overall comprehensibility	27	3.7	4.7	1.0
Frequency and accuracy in word stress, and sentence stress	3.6	3.5	4.8	1.3
Frequency and accuracy in intonation	4.1	3.9	4.5	0.6

Regarding the details of improvement, basing on the detailed description of the test scores, it can be seen that though students' pronunciation was mostly intelligible, most students' pronunciation was not clear in terms of word stress, sentence stress and intonation before the shadowing practice. However, after the six weeks practiced shadowing, they were more awareness of the use of word stress, sentence stress and intonation in their speaking. Thus, they showed more of those aspects in the posttest and gained better marks for these elements. In the three aspects, the use of word stress, and sentence stress made the biggest change when students' marks raised 1.3 point after shadowing practice. The overall comprehensibility of students' pronunciation also improved with the average of 1.0 point higher than before. Though intonation is still students' weakness, the average score for this aspect still raised from 3.9 in the pretest to 4.5 in the posttest.

Table 3: Students' attitude towards the effectiveness of shadowing practice on their pronunciation

Opinion	Number	Percentage
Agree	27	100
Disagree	0	0

Table 3 above presents information about students' attitudes toward the effectiveness of shadowing practice on their pronunciation. 100% of the students surveyed agreed that shadowing practice had positive impact on their pronunciation. The detailed survey results about students' attitude towards the effectiveness of shadowing practice on different aspects of pronunciation are summarized in table 4.

Table 4: Students' attitude towards the effectiveness of shadowing practice on different aspects of pronunciation

Opinion	Agree	Percentage
Improvement in individual sounds	27	100
Improvement in word stress	27	100
Improvement of sentence stress	18	67
Improvement in intonation	24	78

Figures in table 4 have presented student' evaluation of the application of shadowing technique in learning pronunciation. 100% students found that shadowing practice helped them improve their own pronunciation of individual sounds and word stress. 78% believed that they made some improvement in intonation and 67% thought they were better aware of sentence stress in their speaking.

The test and survey results both agreed that shadowing practice had positive effects on improving students' pronunciation. These findings were correspondent with those of studies before (Lin, 2009; Salim, A., Terasne., &Narasima, L.,2020, Foote J.A& McDonough K.,2017), which confirm that shadowing technique has made some improvement in students' pronunciation.

V. Discussion

This study investigated whether the application of shadowing technique was useful for students' pronunciation in terms of the comprehensibility, the clarity and accuracy of word stress and sentence stress, and intonation. It also looked at how students evaluated the impacts of shadowing practice on their pronunciation. Overall, the findings presented above indicated that participants were positive about the shadowing activities, and saw them as an effective way to improve their pronunciation. Shadowing practice not only gave students the opportunities to hear the sounds but also require them to produced sounds immediately. This way of practice is effective since students only have to focus on pronunciation without being distracted by any other requests. On top of that, shadowing requires learners to produce the sounds immediately with as little delay as possible right after they hear; therefore, this potentially helps them capture and practice all pronunciation features at once while limit learners' own invention of word pronunciation when they practice. To successfully make use of shadowing, it is important that careful consideration should be made" (Foote, J.A & McDonough, K., 2017), regarding the materials for practice, and instructions for learners to ensure that they are clear about the requirements and expectations. Tips suggested by Foote, J.A (2017), which are allowing students to record themselves while practicing, choosing appropriate models, providing not too long shadowing stimulus (the sound files given to students), providing scripts and encouraging students to mimic the speaking as closely as

possible, should really be taken into consideration to ensure the successful application of shadowing technique in teaching pronunciation.

VI. Conclusion

Shadowing is highly complimented for its potentials in improving English language learners' pronunciation thanks to the opportunities of immediate exposure and practice it offers. Though the sample scale was quite modest, its results again confirms that shadowing is a useful technique in pronunciation teaching and learning. Given some disadvantages, regarding the amount of workload for teachers in preparation stage as well as the time that students are expected to invest, shadowing is worth applying in more andmore EFL settings in order to boost learners' pronunciation.

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