

The Development of English Language Skills through Shadowing Exercises.

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Abstract

With increasing interest in the communicative approach to English language teaching, many universities and high schools have started to teach shadowing in their language program. Shadowing is a standard exercise in training programs for interpreters, but Torikai (1997) states that shadowing has a number of positive aspects for English language learners. This paper scrutinizes how shadowing can contribute to the field of language learning by examining one English class where students practice shadowing. After three months of practice, students responded to a questionnaire. The result revealed that more than 80% of the students considered their English skills improved through shadowing exercise and considered it an effective exercise. It also helped to boost their motivation and they participated more actively in class.

Introduction

It has been over four decades since communicative approach to language teaching first appeared in the field of second language acquisition (Hymes 1972, quoted in Brown 2000). Since then, models of communicative competence have been discussed extensively in the field of English language teaching (Brown 2000, Savignon 1997), and lately the demand for English education with a focus on communication is increasing in Japan. The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT, 2003) proposed an “Action Plan to Cultivate Japanese with English Abilities” in 2003. This policy to improve communicative skills is designed to enable Japanese people to share their thoughts and feelings in English in an increasingly global society.

However, due to communicative restrictions of the Japanese environment, where people have few opportunities to use English in natural contexts, the chance to be exposed to English is rare.

Some learners with high motivation but with little opportunity to speak English have difficulty in developing the skills of English communication in Japanese classrooms. Rubin (1975) states that having ‘opportunity’ is an essential aspect of successful language learning. Opportunity refers

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to the chance of learner exposure to the English language. More opportunity to speak English is crucial in a Japanese classroom.

Many universities today, including Rikkyo University and Meikai University, have started to incorporate ‘interpreting’ as part of their language program. One of the interpreting exercises, shadowing, has been attracting a great deal of attention in language education programs. Acquiring communicative competence is a crucial task for English learners. Torikai (1997) states that shadowing can be considered an effective approach to improving listening skills and speaking skills, which are key components of oral communication. The research goal described in this paper focuses on whether and, if so, to what extent, shadowing can be effective in improving a learner’s communicative skills. I would then like to explore whether shadowing successfully motivates students and offers opportunities to enhance a learner’s participation in class.

Background Research

In recent years, shadowing has become a hot topic in the field of English education. Tamai (2002a) states that “Shadowing is an act or a task of listening in which the learner tracks the heard speech and repeats it as exactly as possible while listening attentively to the in-coming information” (181). Originally, shadowing was an interpreting training exercise. In interpreting, the interpretation is given as quickly as the interpreter hears the speech in a source language and reformulates the message in the target language. The interpreter’s ability to listen and speak at the same time is a crucial skill for the interpreter trainee. Since shadowing is the dual task of listening and speaking at the same time, shadowing is regarded as a good interpreting training program.

Today, in Japan, shadowing is viewed as a strong and effective exercise to be incorporated into the English language program. Tanaka (2004) points out that shadowing requires one to reproduce the heard speech within a short space of time. She states that through this exercise, the students’ listening skills (input skills), comprehension, and the reproduction skills (output skills) are highlighted. If any of the skills are absent, shadowing will not be performed successfully. Shadowing is a good exercise to evaluate the present learner’s skills of input, comprehension, and output. By becoming aware of their English skills, students are more likely to improve through shadowing which simultaneously focuses on listening, comprehending and speaking.

Moreover, Someya (1996b) claims that shadowing helps to improve the sense of prosody: the rhythm, intonation, and accent of speech. Prosody is an important aspect in communication, with 30-40% of the meaning of communication captured by prosody (Someya 1996b). However, in general, there is limited time to teach the sense of prosody in English language teaching. Moreover, in daily life, chances to be exposed to English are rare in Japan. Through training in shadowing, learners are able to familiarize themselves with English prosody. By getting accustomed to the

prosody of English speakers, learners are more likely to improve their listening and speaking skills, since prosody is a key aspect for understanding and delivering messages.

Torikai (2003) states that shadowing also makes it possible to enhance concentration. She states that general listening activities tend to be passive, lacking focus, whereas, in shadowing, learners try to concentrate extensively on listening to the message and reproduce it in order to follow the speech. By doing so, Torikai states that shadowing could enhance memory capacity, which brings about listening enhancement.

As mentioned earlier, today the most important aspect for Japanese learners is to acquire communicative competence (Mext 2003). Though it is essential, most learners do not have the opportunity to communicate in English nor are they trained in exercises designed to develop communicative skills. Shadowing can be designed to develop communication skills as it requires multi-tasking while shadowing.

Methodology

Considering the effectiveness of shadowing, different focus-on-shadowing exercises were designed and implemented. These shadowing exercises assist students to understand their present skills of input, comprehension, and output that are essential in communication, and try to improve these skills in English classes. Therefore, the researcher highlights the following three points to keep in mind during the practice.

1. Participants should concentrate on correct enunciation.
2. Participants should attend to meaning.
3. Participants should reproduce speech by picturing the story.

Participants

The participants were 25 University of the Sacred Heart students in Freshman English class. In this university, students were assigned to classes based on their Comprehensive English Test scores. The students belonged to level 16 out of 20, which was the low-intermediate level. Most of them had passed either Pre-level 2 or level 2 English Language Proficiency Test (STEP). This class met twice a week and shadowing exercise was conducted every class. The questionnaire was given on July 17th, 2012, after they had practiced shadowing for about three months.

Materials

The audio materials for shadowing were from “Issues for Today”. This textbook is being used in the Freshman English class. Shadowing is a relatively involved and complex process, so most students would find it difficult to follow the story and reproduce the speech if they hadn’t heard the

speech before. In order to understand its effectiveness and reap its benefits in a short period of time, all the shadowing materials were stories previously covered in a reading textbook. Moreover, as the researcher wanted students to understand the speech and acquire the vocabulary and the sentence structures, only three chapters were covered in the first semester. In every class, students read some paragraphs and performed shadowing. Students were familiar with the speech, allowing them to focus on listening to the speech attentively and perform the shadowing without losing sight of the purpose.

Procedure

Once some paragraphs were studied in class, the students were instructed to conduct shadowing exercise. The instruction involved the following procedures.

1. Pair-work activity

Students were asked to work in pairs and listen to the CD once. They were asked to slash the chunks of meaning, check the prosody, and practice pronunciation. After this, students practiced reading with a partner.

2. Shadowing: Focus on prosody twice

First of all, students were instructed to focus on prosody rather than the meaning or content of the story. Students tried to reproduce the speech while concentrating on correct enunciation and intonation. Students performed this exercise twice. In the second round, students were encouraged to improve their shadowing skills by paying attention to the parts where they had made mistakes, and they were encouraged not to reproduce in a monotonous manner.

3. Shadowing: Focus on meaning twice

Next, students were instructed to attend to meaning and try to picture the story in their mind and anticipate the contents while shadowing. Komatsu (2003) states that the foremost task in interaction is not the word but the meaning of the speech, and all communication starts from listening, which is to comprehend utterances. Therefore, students were encouraged to focus on semantic content. By attempting to anticipate the content of the speech during the shadowing exercise, the researcher hopes the students can gradually picture the image of speech elements which then facilitate their understanding of speech.

4. Shadowing: Setting personal learning goals

Lastly, students conducted the entire shadowing exercise. So far, they practiced shadowing four times so they identified areas to improve or which part they couldn't follow. In order to be successful language learners, Rubin and Thompson (1994) recommend that students should first figure out what objectives are most important to them and then

set modest goals. Therefore, students were encouraged to set a personal objective by reflecting on their previous performance. Having an opportunity to concentrate on listening extensively and attentively and reproduce the speech, they were more likely to familiarize themselves with the speech.

Procedures for Data Collections

The study included a questionnaire (see appendix A) in which students self-evaluated their ability and progress. On a scale of 1 (not effective at all) to 5 (highly effective), the participants were asked to rank the effectiveness on such aspects as Prosody, Listening, Comprehension, and Speaking.

In this paper, a focus was placed on individual learners' responses to the experience of the shadowing, and their resulting thoughts and feelings.

Results

	Highly Effective 5	Rather Effective 4	Not Sure 3	Rather Ineffective 2	Not effective at all 1
1. Prosody	9	11	5	0	0
2. Listening & Comprehension	7	16	1	1	0
3. Reproduction	10	11	3	1	0
4. Speaking	6	17	1	0	1

Prosody

20 students out of 25 students put 4 (effective) or 5 (highly effective) for the evaluation of prosody.

The following student comments were translated by the researcher:

- I looked out for the rhythm of speech while Shadowing, and tried to imitate the speaker's speech. By doing so, I felt that my pronunciation improved.
- I think it is important to make an effort to move the mouth fast and follow the speed of original speech. The speed of my speech is slow and monotonous but I tried to imitate the intonation and rhythm of the speech and it seemed my understanding improved.
- I think shadowing is effective to get used to listening to the English sounds. We do not have the opportunity to live with native speakers and we have few chances to use English in Japan, but while practicing shadowing, I feel like I'm practicing speaking English.

Listening & Comprehension & Reproduction

As for listening comprehension, 23 students out of 25 students marked 4 or 5 points and evaluated shadowing positively. 21 students out of 25 students scored 4 or 5 for reproduction.

- I felt that I was using my concentration more than usual to perform my shadowing well.
- I was able to retain the contents and remember the phrases and sentence structures by actually uttering them in my voice.
- I thought that I couldn't follow the contents or store the information if I was just listening to it. But I could pay much more attention to the contents by performing shadowing.
- It's much easier to understand the message.
- Only listening to the CD is a passive activity and I don't maintain a high level of concentration but my level of retention was enhanced by actually reproducing the speech.
- I think that shadowing would increase my knowledge of English words and phrases.

Most of the participants confirmed that their skills of listening, comprehension and reproduction improved. Although the subjective feeling of comprehension that arises in a speaker's mind is not necessarily a reliable indicator of the actual level of comprehension achieved, the positive subjective feeling did bring about a good effect on language learning in this study.

Speaking

23 out of 25 students marked 4 or 5 points and evaluated positively.

- I think shadowing would provide many opportunities to listen to various words and phrases so my speaking skill would improve. Actually, my stock of words increased through shadowing.
- Shadowing would help me use muscles that are required to pronounce English properly. If I get used to it, I hope my speaking skill would improve.
- Performing my shadowing helped me understand the sequence of English sounds better.

Many participants confirmed that shadowing is effective for speaking English. They perceived shadowing as an active exercise which specializes in speech production.

Discussion

One of the aims of conducting this research was to explore whether shadowing can motivate students while improving their communicative skills. The researcher believes motivation is associated with enjoyment. If students enjoy practicing and have a positive feeling, they can maintain high motivation. Rubin (1975) claims that motivation is one of the essential aspects in good language learning. It is a widely shared idea that a good language learner has a high motivation to communicate in English. However, with few chances to communicate with people in

English, the Japanese language environment lowers learner motivation in studying and acquiring communicative skills in English. Moreover, how to provide motivation for learners within the school framework is being questioned.

The researcher believes shadowing can break through this situation by developing communicative skills. In the questionnaire, in response to the question “Did you feel that shadowing would be effective in learning English language?” 20 students out of 25 students answered that shadowing exercise was effective. Some students said they felt some sense of accomplishment or fulfillment in trying to perform shadowing as they needed to listen attentively and reproduce as soon as they heard the speech. In the class, most of the students saw progress in their English skills through shadowing. Therefore, they felt more motivated and worked on shadowing actively. Shadowing is an activity that every student can participate in and practice English in a short period of time. Moreover, students can understand their English level through the practice. Reading the same material repeatedly is somewhat tedious and it is quite difficult for students to see their progress in their reading ability but shadowing with a focus on prosody and meaning proves to be a good exercise as they can recognize where to focus and practice.

Moreover, the researcher believes shadowing can create an active learning environment and encourage students to participate actively. In the questionnaire, most of the students responded that setting their own learning goals made them aware of skills that needed improvement, and they actively worked to develop these skills. This awareness indicates active language learners. Active participation and goal setting lead to better progress. Therefore, if students are encouraged to identify personal goals as well as steps that are necessary to achieve the goal, they can participate in English class more actively and concentrate on improving their language skills.

However, in the questionnaire, five students said that they didn’t enjoy it. They all said, “Shadowing was difficult for me. I couldn’t reproduce the speech as the speed of the CD was too fast.” Lack of confidence may discourage the learner and lower their motivation. What is important for English instructors is to provide materials that match the proficiency level of students in order to promote confidence and help improve students’ English skills.

Conclusion

Interpretation and English language education are substantially different subjects, but they are connected through the concept of communication. Over the past decade, instruction based upon the communicative approach has become the explicit focus of English language teaching. However, learners in Japan are still not acquiring effective communication skills in English, nor are they obtaining opportunities to practice English communication. This paper examined whether shadowing enhances learner’s communicative skills and successfully motivates them to improve

their skills.

The result of the survey data showed that 80% of the students enjoyed practicing shadowing and considered it an effective exercise. Torikai (1997) states that shadowing can be considered an effective approach to improve listening skills and speaking skills, both key components in oral communication. In this paper, the survey showed that more than 90% of students responded that they thought shadowing could be a useful exercise to improve their listening comprehension and speaking. Students reported their level of retention was enhanced by actually uttering the speech. Moreover, they said that it helped to increase their stock of words and phrases. Most of the students had a positive feeling on this exercise as they were also convinced that their level of English skills developed through this exercise.

However, in this study, authentic materials were not introduced. Widdowson (1990) states that authentic materials refer to real life discourse such as news, speech, interviews, animations, lectures etc, where language styles differ in each material. He states that such materials have a positive effect on language learning.

If students get used to practicing shadowing, authentic material could be introduced which is interesting and relevant to their level of English ability so that students are more likely to enjoy the class and familiarize themselves with various accents. By doing so, learners will have more opportunities to encounter real English and develop their language skills through shadowing.

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Appendix A

Questionnaire

The Effectiveness of Shadowing

Section I.

1. Did you know shadowing exercise before you enter university?

YES

NO

2. How often do you “speak” English?

どれくらい英語を話しますか? (教科書音読でもいいです。)

Shadowingをしてみてください・・・

3. How was the shadowing exercise? Did you like it?

(Shadowingを授業でやるのは、好きですか?)

Yes

No

理由: _____

4. Which do you like, Individual Shadowing or Pair-work Shadowing?

Individual Shadowing

Pair-work Shadowing

どうしてですか?

[

]

5. Did you feel that shadowing would be effective in learning English language?

Shadowingの練習は英語力向上に役立つと思いますか？

Effective

Ineffective

Shadowingをするととにかく効果があると思いますか？

6. Did you experience any change in terms of listening comprehension?

Shadowingの練習をした後で何か変化はありましたか？

7. Do you want to continue practicing shadowing activities on your own?

自宅でshadowingの練習をやってみようと思いますか？

Yes

No

理由： _____

	Highly Effective 5	Rather Effective 4	Not Sure 3	Rather Ineffective 2	Not effective at all 1
1. Prosody					
2. Listening					
3. Comprehension					
4. Speaking					