



A theoretical overview of the shadowing technique in developing listening and speaking skills among students

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Abstract

Improving listening and speaking skills is a key goal in communicative language teaching, especially for non-major English learners. This paper introduces the Shadowing Technique as an effective method to develop oral competence through imitation of native speech. Supported by key theories such as the Imitative Theory, Input and Output Hypotheses, and Cognitive Load Theory, Shadowing helps enhance pronunciation, fluency, and language reflexes. The paper reviews both international and Vietnamese research on the topic and proposes a six-step model for classroom implementation. Despite some challenges, Shadowing is shown to be a practical and engaging approach that fosters learner autonomy and real-time communication, making it a valuable strategy in language teaching.

Keywords: Shadowing Technique, non-major English learners, speaking – listening skills, pronunciation, intonation, repetition

Introduction

In the context of deepening globalization, proficiency in foreign languages, particularly English has become an essential requirement in both education and professional life. In Vietnam, English is a compulsory subject from primary to tertiary education, with listening and speaking recognized as two core skills that reflect a learner's communicative competence in real-life situations.

However, for elementary-level learners (A1–A2 according to the CEFR), developing listening and speaking skills poses significant challenges. Common difficulties include mispronunciation, unnatural intonation, limited vocabulary, difficulty keeping up with native speakers' pace, and poor communicative reflexes. These limitations hinder learners' confidence in using the language both in classroom interactions and in real-world scenarios.

To address these issues, educators and language professionals have explored various pedagogical innovations, among which the Shadowing Technique, introduced by Professor Alexander Arguelles, has proven simple yet highly effective. This method requires learners to repeat or “shadow” spoken language almost simultaneously as they hear it, typically through short audio or video segments. Notably, immediate comprehension is not a prerequisite; instead, learners focus on accurately reproducing sounds, intonation, and rhythm. Through repeated practice, students develop active listening, more native-like pronunciation, and oral fluency—without relying heavily on explicit grammar rules. In this respect, the Shadowing Technique closely resembles how children acquire their first language.

In classroom settings, Shadowing can be easily implemented using sample dialogues, podcasts, short news clips, or videos suited to students' proficiency levels. The technique not only enhances listening comprehension and pronunciation but also strengthens vocabulary retention, speaking reflexes, and public speaking confidence. Therefore, it offers a highly practical method for beginner-level learners who require accessible, student-friendly, and

replicable approaches that can be practiced both in and outside the classroom.

Content

Theoretical foundations and mechanisms of the shadowing technique

1. Overview of the Shadowing technique

The Shadowing Technique was developed and introduced by Professor Alexander Arguelles, an American linguist renowned for his polyglot abilities in over 50 languages. During his process of self-directed language learning, Arguelles discovered that immediate repetition of native speech significantly improved pronunciation, fluency, and retention. He subsequently formalized this method under the name “Shadowing Technique,” which metaphorically refers to following the speaker like a “shadow.”

Unlike traditional approaches that compartmentalize the four language skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing), Shadowing is an integrated method combining listening and speaking in real time. Learners simultaneously listen to and repeat spoken content, closely imitating native speakers in sound, rhythm, intonation, and pace.

2. Theoretical underpinnings of the Shadowing technique

The efficacy of the Shadowing Technique is not merely anecdotal; it is underpinned by robust theories in applied linguistics and language psychology. Several foundational theories support its effectiveness:

a. Imitative theory of language learning

According to Skinner (1957) ^[1] and Bandura (1977) ^[2], imitation plays a central role in early language acquisition. Children learn their first language by listening to adults and imitating speech patterns, eventually internalizing grammar and vocabulary. Shadowing mirrors this natural process in adult learners, emphasizing consistent and systematic mimicry of native speech.

b. Input hypothesis (Krashen, 1982) [5]

Stephen Krashen’s Input Hypothesis emphasizes that language acquisition occurs when learners are exposed to "comprehensible input"—language slightly above their current proficiency level. Although Shadowing does not necessitate immediate comprehension, repeated exposure to authentic input through Shadowing facilitates familiarity with phonological patterns and structure, enabling gradual understanding through context and repetition.

c. Output hypothesis (Swain, 1985) [10]

Merrill Swain argues that producing language (output) is just as crucial as receiving it (input). Shadowing creates an immediate and sustained output experience, requiring learners to vocalize language in real time, thus reinforcing spoken production skills and accelerating communicative reflexes.

d. Cognitive load theory (Sweller, 1988) [11]

Sweller’s theory posits that learning improves when information is processed through multiple sensory channels. Shadowing engages auditory and oral channels simultaneously, enhancing short-term memory retention and promoting the transfer of information into long-term memory.

3. Operational components of shadowing

The Shadowing Technique functions as a multi-phase learning cycle, encompassing the following key components:

- a. Active listening:** Learners listen attentively to the audio or video content, focusing on pronunciation, stress, intonation, and speaker emotion.
- b. Immediate repetition:** Students repeat the content almost simultaneously with the speaker, shadowing the audio without pausing or analyzing meaning.
- c. Recording and feedback:** Learners record their own voice while shadowing and compare it to the original input, enabling them to identify and correct pronunciation, intonation, or pacing errors.
- d. Repetitive practice:** Repeating the same segment 3–5 times helps learners internalize sentence patterns and develop automaticity in speech production.

4. Common types of shadowing

According to Hamada (2016) [4] and Murphey (2001) [6], Shadowing can be categorized into several distinct types:

Type of Shadowing	Description
Content Shadowing	The learner repeats both the content and intonation exactly as in the original.
Prosodic Shadowing	The learner imitates only prosodic features such as intonation, stress, and rhythm, without focusing on lexical content.
Silent Shadowing	The learner subvocalizes or repeats silently in their mind instead of speaking aloud.
Paraphrasing Shadowing	The learner rephrases the content using their own words, applicable to more advanced learners.

5. Positive impacts of shadowing on language skills

Numerous studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of Shadowing in enhancing listening and speaking skills:

- Hamada (2016) [4], in a study with Japanese university students, found that learners who practiced Shadowing for four weeks showed significant improvement in pronunciation and TOEIC listening scores.
- Murphey (2001) [6] emphasized that Shadowing not only develops learners’ pronunciation but also enhances their learner autonomy and reduces speaking anxiety.
- In Vietnam, research by Nguyễn Thị Hương (2021) [7] and Trần Văn Hòa (2020) [12, 13] confirmed that incorporating Shadowing into English classes for non-English majors led to noticeable improvements in phonological accuracy and oral fluency.

6. Considerations and challenges in applying shadowing

Despite its proven effectiveness, the implementation of Shadowing in classroom settings, particularly at the primary or lower proficiency levels, faces several challenges:

- The fast pace of native speech may overwhelm beginners.
- Pronunciation difficulties can lead to learner frustration.
- There is often a lack of materials that are level-appropriate and engaging for students.
- Shadowing requires persistence and regular practice, which can lead to boredom if not supported with clear guidance and teacher scaffolding.

Hence, instructors are advised to select short, simple, and slow-paced input materials and provide step-by-step instructions to help learners recognize the benefits of Shadowing and maintain motivation.

To conclude, Shadowing is not only an effective method for developing listening and speaking skills but also a well-grounded technique supported by theories in linguistics and education. By combining both input and output within the same task, Shadowing enables learners to acquire language in a natural manner: listen – imitate – repeat – understand – apply.

When implemented appropriately, especially among elementary-level learners, Shadowing can bring about significant learning outcomes. The following sections of this paper will propose a lesson plan and specific strategies for integrating Shadowing into English language classrooms in Vietnamese secondary schools.

The benefits of shadowing for listening and speaking Skills

In second language acquisition research, Shadowing has been widely acknowledged as an effective technique for improving both listening and speaking proficiency. Regular practice with this technique enables learners not only to imitate native-like pronunciation but also to enhance their verbal response time, fluency, and confidence. The following outlines key benefits derived from both international and Vietnamese empirical studies.

1. Improvement in pronunciation and intonation

One of the most widely reported benefits of Shadowing is its contribution to clearer pronunciation and more natural intonation. Learners, through repeated imitation of native speakers, become more attuned to stress patterns, word

articulation, and speech rhythm. Hamada (2016) ^[4] reported that 15 minutes of Shadowing per day over four weeks significantly improved students' pronunciation clarity and natural intonation.

In Vietnam, Nguyen Thi Huong (2021) found that non-English major students who practiced shadowing three times a week over six weeks not only pronounced English more accurately but also developed self-monitoring strategies to correct phonological errors. Shadowing promotes simultaneous auditory input and vocal output, helping Vietnamese learners overcome common phonological issues such as final consonant omission, incorrect word stress, and flat intonation.

2. Enhanced listening comprehension

Shadowing also strengthens learners' listening skills by requiring intense focus to keep up with native speech in real-time. This trains the ear to detect connected speech, reductions, and prosodic cues. Repeating the same passage 3–5 times helps students engage in more active and detailed listening.

Murphey (2001) ^[6] described Shadowing as a form of “deep listening” in which learners engage both cognitively and physically with the language. It enhances their ability to recognize vocabulary in rapid speech, a skill often underdeveloped in traditional listening activities.

3. Increased communicative responsiveness

Shadowing enhances learners' verbal reflexes by reducing their dependence on grammatical analysis during spontaneous speech. As students grow accustomed to immediate repetition, they develop a more intuitive approach to language processing, similar to the way children acquire their first language. Swain (1985) ^[10] emphasized the importance of language output, and Shadowing serves as a direct and effective form of output practice.

At the elementary level, learners often struggle to form sentences spontaneously. Shadowing supplies complete sentence models, which the brain stores and retrieves efficiently during real-life communication without the need for conscious construction.

4. Building confidence in speaking

Lack of confidence is a major barrier to speaking in a foreign language. Shadowing fosters daily speaking habits using familiar materials, gradually eliminating learners' fear of making mistakes or speaking in public.

According to Trần Văn Hòa (2020) ^[12, 13], 82% of surveyed students reported feeling “less anxious about speaking English” after practicing Shadowing regularly over an eight-week period. The frequent repetition of short, functional phrases boosts retention and encourages confident use in everyday contexts such as self-introductions, giving directions, or ordering food.

5. Consolidation of vocabulary and sentence structures

Unlike isolated vocabulary learning methods, Shadowing exposes learners to lexical items in context. This supports the acquisition of both words meaning and sentence formation patterns. Through repetition, learners naturally internalize grammar structures and cohesive devices used in authentic communication.

Murphey (2001) ^[6] noted that Shadowing builds a “lexical and syntactic repertoire” in long-term memory. Chunk-

based repetition allows learners to memorize and reuse functional phrases such as:

“*Would you like some...?*”

“*Can I have...?*”

“*How much does it cost?*”

These language chunks facilitate real-life interactions without requiring learners to mentally translate from their first language.

Based on both theoretical and empirical evidence, it is evident that Shadowing offers substantial benefits for listening and speaking development. Regular practice significantly enhances pronunciation, listening accuracy, fluency, and speaking confidence. Moreover, it supports vocabulary acquisition and sentence formation in a natural and context-rich manner, something that traditional methods often fail to achieve effectively. Consequently, Shadowing should be regarded as a core technique in communicative language teaching, particularly for beginner learners.

Steps for implementing the shadowing technique in the classroom

The Shadowing technique does not require sophisticated equipment or advanced technology; however, it must be implemented systematically and consistently to ensure optimal effectiveness. Integrating Shadowing into listening–speaking instruction in English classrooms necessitates that teachers not only understand the core principles of the method but also adapt it to learners' proficiency levels, lesson duration, and specific instructional objectives.

The following six steps outline a practical approach to applying Shadowing in the Vietnamese classroom context, accompanied by pedagogical considerations to enhance its impact.

Step 1: Selecting appropriate materials for the proficiency and learning goals.

The choice of materials plays a crucial role in determining the success of the Shadowing process. Teachers should select short, clear, and contextually relevant audio texts that align with learners' language levels and interests. Recommended materials include:

- Short dialogues from standard textbooks (e.g., Face2Face, American English File);
- Simple podcasts such as BBC Learning English: English at the Movies or Voice of America Learning English;
- Short news reports or animated videos with English subtitles (e.g., Peppa Pig, Storyberries).

Important considerations

- For elementary learners (A1–A2), audio segments should be limited to 30 seconds to 1 minute;
- Content should revolve around familiar topics (e.g., introducing oneself, hobbies, shopping, asking for directions);
- Teachers may need to edit content (e.g., shorten, adjust subtitles, clarify vocabulary) to avoid cognitive overload.

Step 2: Listening to the full audio to grasp general meaning. Before Shadowing begins, learners should listen to the entire audio once to understand the context and overall

message. This “pre-shadowing” phase helps reduce anxiety and prepares learners for the upcoming repetition tasks. During this phase, teachers may ask learners to:

- Answer general comprehension questions (e.g., Who? What? Where?);
- Underline key words while listening;
- Note down 2–3 main ideas from the dialogue.

The goal is to establish a basic understanding of the content, ensuring that Shadowing is meaning-driven rather than mechanical mimicry.

Step 3: Shadowing by sentence or short segments. This is the core stage of Shadowing. Learners listen to a sentence or phrase (5–10 seconds), then immediately repeat it, aiming to match.

Phonemes: accurate pronunciation;

Intonation: appropriate rise and fall of pitch;

Stress: correct emphasis within words and sentences;

Speed: a speaking pace close to a native speaker.

Teachers can utilize pause functions or segment audio into manageable units. In large classes, learners can work in small groups (2–3 students) and later perform individually for feedback.

A commonly used sequence

1. The teacher plays the sample sentence.
2. Learners repeat immediately (chorally or individually);
3. Teacher provides corrective feedback when necessary.

Suggested adaptation: Employ “Delayed Shadowing” (learners repeat 2–3 seconds after hearing) for those struggling with native-speed speech.

Step 4: Repeating multiple times to improve automaticity. Effective Shadowing requires multiple repetitions. Learners should listen and repeat at least 3–5 times using the same material to build automatic speech responses. Repetition enhances not only speaking fluency but also long-term retention of vocabulary, expressions, and structures.

Suggested progression

Round 1: Slow-paced Shadowing with subtitles;

Round 2: Normal-speed Shadowing without subtitles;

Round 3: Shadowing with eyes closed to focus on auditory input;

Rounds 4–5: Shadowing combined with role-playing or acting.

Teachers should encourage persistence and create a non-threatening atmosphere. Mistakes and corrections are a natural part of the learning process and should be embraced positively.

Step 5: Recording and self-review for self-evaluation.

Recording one’s voice while “Shadowing” significantly enhances self-awareness and learning outcomes. It allows learners to:

- Listen to their own speech output;
- Compare it with the original recording;
- Identify errors in pronunciation, pausing, and stress patterns;
- Reflect on and adjust their performance accordingly.

Simple tools may be used

- Mobile phones with built-in recorders;
- Free software such as *Audacity* or *Voice Recorder*;
- English-learning apps with Shadowing features (e.g., ELSA Speak, YouGlish, FluentU). Learners should be instructed to save and track their recordings regularly to monitor their progress over time. Seeing tangible improvements boosts learners’ motivation and sense of achievement.

Step 6: Assessment and personalized feedback. After shadowing practice, teachers should allocate time to assess learners’ performance and progress. Error correction should be handled sensitively and tailored to each student, focusing on recurring issues rather than every minor mistake to avoid discouragement.

Suggested assessment formats

- Teacher provides direct feedback after each performance;
- Learners conduct self-assessments using checklists;
- Peer review of each other’s recordings followed by constructive feedback.

Evaluation criteria may include

- Clarity of pronunciation;
- Intonation accuracy compared to native models;
- Consistency in speech rate
- Fluency and overall coherence.

Frequent formative assessments allow learners to see incremental progress, fostering higher engagement and improved outcomes.

In conclusion, the implementation of Shadowing in language classrooms requires careful planning and flexible application. The six steps from material selection to performance evaluation are all essential components for fostering listening - speaking skills in a natural, reflexive, and effective manner. When applied systematically, Shadowing can move beyond a supplemental activity to become a core strategy in communicative English teaching, particularly for secondary school learners and non-English major university students.

Conclusion

The Shadowing Technique presents a highly practical and theoretically grounded approach to enhancing English listening and speaking skills, particularly among elementary-level learners. Rooted in prominent language acquisition theories—including the Imitative Theory, Input and Output Hypotheses, and Cognitive Load Theory—Shadowing enables learners to process and reproduce language in real time, thereby reinforcing fluency, pronunciation, and auditory comprehension. As demonstrated in both global and Vietnamese contexts, consistent application of Shadowing leads to measurable improvements in learners’ communicative competence, builds speaking confidence, and fosters autonomous language learning habits. While challenges such as fast speech rates and initial learner resistance exist, these can be mitigated through careful material selection, scaffolded instruction, and regular feedback. The six-step implementation framework provided in this paper offers educators a flexible and effective strategy to embed

Shadowing into classroom instruction, transforming it from a supplementary exercise into a core pedagogical practice. By encouraging active engagement, multimodal learning, and contextualized language use, Shadowing serves not only as a method of skill development but also as a bridge toward real-world language proficiency. Given its accessibility, adaptability, and proven impact, Shadowing should be widely adopted in language teaching curricula, especially for learners at the foundational stages of their English-learning journey.

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