

Shadowing technique: Exploring pre-service EFL teachers' perspectives to improve speaking skills

Técnica de Shadowing: Explorando as Perspectivas de Professores de Inglês como Língua Estrangeira em formação para melhorar habilidades de fala

Técnica de Shadowing: Explorando las perspectivas de los profesores de Inglés como lengua extranjera en formación para mejorar las habilidades de expresión oral

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Abstract

This qualitative study aimed to identify the students' perspectives on the usage of the shadowing technique used to improve their English-speaking skills during one semester. The participants are 16 Ecuadorian pre-service teachers who are enrolled in the Pedagogy of National and Foreign Languages career at Quevedo State Technical University. The data were collected through a questionnaire and analyzed in the light of the grounded theory. The results of the study show that shadowing provides them with a unique opportunity to develop their fluency, pronunciation, and intonation in the target language. Also, the participants considered shadowing to allow for the internalization of linguistic patterns and grammatical structures in a more natural and automatic way. Consequently, this research underscores the significance of discerning students' viewpoints on the instructional strategies employed in the classroom to tailor them appropriately to each specific context. Additional studies remain essential within the Ecuadorian framework to delve into how students' views on educators' teaching techniques impact them, particularly in terms of their emotional responses.

Keywords: Shadowing technique; Perspectives; Pre-service teachers; EFL; Ecuador.

Resumo

Este estudo qualitativo teve como objetivo identificar as perspectivas dos alunos sobre o uso da técnica de shadowing para melhorar suas habilidades de fala em inglês durante um semestre. Os participantes são 16 futuros professores equatorianos matriculados no curso de Pedagogia em Línguas Nacionais e Estrangeiras na Universidade Técnica Estadual de Quevedo. Os dados foram coletados por meio de um questionário e analisados à luz da teoria fundamentada. Os resultados do estudo indicam que o shadowing oferece uma oportunidade única para desenvolver sua fluência, pronúncia e entonação no idioma alvo. Além disso, os participantes consideraram que o shadowing permite a internalização de padrões linguísticos e estruturas gramaticais de maneira mais natural e automática. Consequentemente, esta pesquisa destaca a importância de entender as opiniões dos alunos sobre as estratégias de ensino usadas em sala de aula para adaptá-las adequadamente a cada contexto específico. Estudos adicionais são essenciais no contexto equatoriano para investigar como as visões dos alunos sobre as técnicas de ensino dos educadores os afetam, particularmente em termos de suas respostas emocionais.

Palavras-chave: Técnica de Shadowing; Perspectivas; Professores em formação; EFL; Equador.

Resumen

Este estudio cualitativo tuvo como objetivo identificar las perspectivas de los estudiantes sobre el uso de la técnica de shadowing utilizada para mejorar sus habilidades de habla inglesa durante un semestre. Los participantes son 16 futuros docentes ecuatorianos que cursan la carrera de Pedagogía de Lenguas Nacionales y Extranjeras de la Universidad Técnica del Estado de Quevedo. Los datos fueron recolectados a través de un cuestionario y analizados a

la luz de la teoría fundamentada. Los resultados del estudio muestran que shadowing les brinda una oportunidad única para desarrollar su fluidez, pronunciación y entonación en el idioma de estudio. Además, los participantes consideraron el Shadowing permite la internalización de patrones lingüísticos y estructuras gramaticales de una manera más natural y automática. En consecuencia, esta investigación resalta la importancia de discernir la perspectiva de los estudiantes sobre las estrategias de instrucción empleadas en el aula para adaptarlas adecuadamente a cada contexto específico. Estudios adicionales siguen siendo esenciales dentro del marco ecuatoriano para profundizar en cómo la visión de los estudiantes sobre las técnicas de enseñanza de los profesores impacta, particularmente en términos de sus respuestas emocionales.

Palabras clave: Técnica Shadowing; Perspectivas; Futuros docentes; Inglés como lengua extranjera; Ecuador.

1. Introduction

In today's interconnected global society, proficiency in English is more than just a valuable skill—it's a vital bridge to opportunity and understanding. Regarded as the global lingua franca, English facilitates international diplomacy, business negotiations, and cultural exchanges. The digital realm, from web content to software interfaces, predominantly operates in English, providing a broader spectrum of information accessibility to those proficient in the language. Moreover, with top educational institutions and scientific research publications majorly leveraging English, the language acts as a gateway to knowledge, innovation, and advancement. Thus, speaking English in this era is akin to possessing a universal key, unlocking doors to diverse opportunities and cross-cultural dialogues.

For aspiring English teachers, mastery of the language is of utmost significance. It equips them with the capability to access a wide array of educational resources and pedagogical methodologies. Moreover, a profound understanding of English ensures they can deliver lessons with clarity, nuance, and confidence, setting a gold standard for their students. Thus, in this era, having an impeccable command over English, especially for English educators, is akin to wielding a universal key, unlocking boundless educational opportunities, and fostering genuine cross-cultural dialogues. One technique that can help students develop their speaking skills is shadowing.

The shadowing technique is a language learning method in which learners repeat a spoken text as closely as possible immediately after hearing it (Yavari & Safiee, 2019). This technique has been shown to be effective in improving listening and speaking skills (Da-un, 2010; Yavari & Safiee, 2019), as it requires learners to focus on both the phonological and semantic aspects of the target language. In recent years, there has been a growing interest in using shadowing to improve speaking skills. This is because shadowing can help students to develop their own speaking skills, as well as to gain insights into the challenges that their students face. There is also some evidence to suggest that shadowing can help learners to improve their vocabulary. Hamada (2019) recommended that research on shadowing should be directed toward examining variations and exploring ways to develop speaking skills.

This study is based on a longitudinal study conducted by the authors that used the shadowing technique to improve pre-service students' pronunciation. All the students improved their pronunciation. However, the researchers wanted to understand if the participants liked the technique and how they felt using it. This preoccupation started because the way teachers lead their classes plays an important role in students learning (Thijssen et al., 2022; Trigwell et al., 1999). For that reason, identifying students' perspectives on classroom practices/methodologies should be the primary purpose of educators (Fisette, 2010) since teachers can (re)adapt the learning context favoring the learning (Cook-Sather, 2003).

Sometimes it is not evident the perceptions of the students towards the methodologies used in class, which is why research like this one is important. One clear example is a study conducted by Santos and Ramirez (2023); they discovered that the technique they used to improve their students' speaking skills, even though they had positive results, one of the participants did not feel comfortable using it. She alleged that when she was using the 4/3/2, she spoke like a rapper leading her to some episodes of anxiety.

2. Literature Review

Speaking skills

Speaking, compared to the other fundamental language skills of reading, writing, and listening, presents the greatest challenge for mastery (Rao, 2019). However, the advent of the Internet and the World Wide Web has created new learning opportunities (Seitenova et al., 2023). When individuals aim to express their ideas through speaking, they are required to locate the appropriate words, construct grammatically correct sentences, arrange the words in the proper order, and engage numerous small muscles for pronunciation. Such a complex process necessitates multifaceted interaction within a natural environment (Seitenova et al., 2023). Recognizing the significance of speaking abilities, various activities have been implemented to enhance learners' speaking skills and prepare them for real-life situations (Kehing & Yunus, 2021).

Achieving proficiency in speaking skills relies on understanding effective strategies. According to Kehing and Yunus (2021), to cultivate learners who possess strong speaking skills, it is essential to comprehend the learning strategies employed by successful individuals. Consequently, the development of students' speaking proficiency has emerged as a significant concern in foreign language instruction. Regrettably, many students struggle to gain confidence in their speaking abilities (Santos et al, 2020). Juhana (2012) and Fernandez and Fonseca (2022) have supported this claim by establishing a correlation between students' emotional intelligence and their proficiency in speaking. Thus, recognizing the connection between emotional understanding and speaking proficiency among students is crucial in addressing this challenge (Santos & Barcelos, 2018)

Shadowing Technique

Shadowing is not a novel strategy used in EFL contexts. The concept of shadowing can be traced back to Cherry's research conducted in 1953, where he investigated speech recognition. In his experiment, participants were exposed to two distinct passages and were required to repeat aloud the content of the passage they attended, a technique known as shadowing. This served as a means to ascertain that they were indeed focusing on only one of the passages. Subsequently, shadowing was employed as a training technique for simultaneous interpreters to develop the ability to listen and speak concurrently (Cherry, 1953).

According to Yavari and Shafiee (2019), the techniques of shadowing and tracking are suitable for regular English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms, focusing on developing speaking fluency. These techniques provide a practical approach, bridging the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application (Yavari & Shafiee, 2019). In a comprehensive analysis conducted by Hamada (2019), significant implications for the use of shadowing in the classroom were identified. One of the implications suggests employing shadowing specifically for speaking practice when students reach an upper-intermediate or advanced level. Yavari and Shafiee (2019) corroborated the positive combined impact of shadowing and tracking the development of speaking fluency in EFL learners. However, further investigation is needed to explore learners' attention during shadowing, and establishing a theoretical model for developing speaking skills through shadowing is warranted (Hamada (2019).

3. Methodology

This investigation used a qualitative approach to collect data from a target population involved in a ten-week program using the Shadowing technique. Students were provided with a qualitative, open-ended questionnaire at the end of the program to find out their thoughts about using the technique. This study is part of quantitative previous research.

Context and participants

The target participants of this study were Ecuadorian pre-service teachers who are enrolled in the Pedagogy of National and Foreign Languages career at Quevedo State Technical University. The students were part of a research program approved by the University to improve speaking language skills called “Shadowing through the use of technology to improve speaking skills.” The program consists of using the shadowing technique for ten weeks twice a week. Of 41 enrolled students, 39 agreed to participate in the process; however, at the end of the study, 16 decided to stay. Thus, the data is based only on those who remain until the end. There were equal females (n=8) and males (n=8), and all of them were between 18 and 24 years old. All of them are native Spanish speakers with no previous knowledge of The Shadowing technique.

Data collection and analysis

The researchers constructed an open-ended questionnaire, circulated through a link on Google form containing a declaration of being informed of the study, a declaration of knowing the anonymity of the responses, and voluntary participation. The questionnaire was designed in the students' mother tongue, which is Spanish, to avoid the possibility that language barriers might have kept students from expressing their opinions (Mackey & Gass, 2005). The second part of the questionnaire had five questions about helpfulness to improve speaking and fluency, contribution to students' learning, an overall review of what they learn, and recommendations for future use.

The analysis of the answers was conducted according to the grounded theory (Glaser, 1998, 2005). First, all the answers were read, and later we searched for connections among them (Holliday, 2005).

It is important to mention that this study followed the procedures of ethical considerations proposed by Kaewkungwal and Adams (2019). Consent was granted, and it was explained all of the processes of the investigation from the goals until the publication of the results.

4. Results and Discussion

In order to get a clear insight into how students perceive the technique, each one of the questions will be presented, and a detailed analysis of their answers.

1- How has practicing the Shadowing technique in class helped you improve your speaking and fluency in English? How do you know it has helped you?

Most students mentioned an improvement in terms of pronunciation, vocabulary acquisition, and fluency. According to a study conducted by Yavari and Shafiee (2019), it was found that shadowing, which taps into the innate human inclination to imitate and repeat, can lead to a notable enhancement in the development of speaking fluency among students: “*The technique of shadowing has helped me a lot in the comprehension and pronunciation of English. Thanks to it, I have gained better control over my vocabulary, and I can notice it when I speak with another person, and they understand perfectly what I am saying.*” Shadowing technique has a positive and significant impact on tertiary students' English pronunciation (Sugiarto et.al., 2021)

On the other hand, only one student reported having an increase in listening comprehension: “*It (Shadowing technique) has been very beneficial as the repetition of scenes has helped me improve my listening skills in the language.*”

The limited number of participants who improved their listening comprehension skills may be attributed to the anxiety and pressure caused by encountering unfamiliar content. In a study conducted by Hamada (2014), participants initially learned new vocabulary, gained an understanding of the lesson materials, and then engaged in shadowing practice. The findings

demonstrated a notable enhancement in listening comprehension skills, indicating that shadowing training is most effective when implemented after familiarizing oneself with the target content (Hamada, 2014).

2- Which aspect of the Shadowing technique contributed the most to your learning? Why?

Since the introduction of the shadowing technique in 1953 for speech recognition (Cherry, 1953) to dissimilar variations and intentions nowadays (Vega, et al., 2021), the key aspect is repetition *“I believe that the technique that contributed the most was watching videos and repeating certain phrases because by listening and repeating words, my brain is able to grasp them better”*.

However, as shadowing was used to improve speaking skills, listening played a crucial role in the procedure *“In terms of listening, when I watch those videos, I feel that each time I understand a little more of what they are saying, and it has also helped me have a different kind of learning, but with very positive purposes”* and *“Listening and repeating the video helped me improve my pronunciation of expressions that I was not familiar with.”*

3- How would you rate the Shadowing technique for improving speaking and fluency in English? Why?

In response to the below questions (research question 1), participants responded with the following comments: 50% of participants (n=8) mentioned that is an effective technique for improving speaking skills. *“Very effective for learning English because it keeps you from getting bored”* and *“Very effective for learning English because it keeps you from getting bored.”* A study carried out in 2017 implementing shadowing indicated that the majority of participants perceived shadowing as effective for listening and speaking skills (Sumiyoshi & Svetanant, 2017). Other students mentioned that it is *“an excellent technique because it helps with vocabulary, listening, speaking, etc.”* and *“... very effective method; for me it's a ten since it has helped me greatly improve my English. Among the techniques I have tried, this has been the most useful one.”*

However, there was another 50% who rated the technique as a good and excellent technique; a 37.5% of individuals (n=6) reviewed it as *“very good because through listening and repeating many times, it helps improve our fluency in pronunciation.”* A 12.5% (n=2) of students said, *“It is good since it can improve the English of each individual who practices it, as it has various approaches such as repetition and listening, which greatly benefit language learning”*. Sumiyoshi & Svetanant (2017) stated that to promote content shadowing, it is crucial to establish a monitoring system that enables participants to assess their comprehension of the content.

4- What did you learn during the pedagogical innovation (practices of the Shadowing technique), and how did you know that you learned it?

The following chart illustrates in detail the answers provided by the participants in terms of features of Speaking Skills.

Table 1 - Specific features of Speaking skills.

FEATURES	COMMENT
Everyday expressions	<i>“I knew that I had learned it when I started using them in my daily life.”</i>
New words	<i>“I learned its pronunciation, even though I made mistakes in some, I took note of which ones I need to improve.”</i> <i>“I knew that I acquired more vocabulary by engaging in short conversations with my friends, in which I would use certain words that I had learned.”</i>
How to pronounce words	<i>“I know about the pronunciation because we recorded an audio before and after, and I have improved.”</i>

Source: Authors.

Regarding pedagogical aspects, some students provided comments such as *“I learned that it is possible to learn differently, and it has helped me in my learning.”*. Sumiyoshi and Svetanant (2017) suggested that, so perfectionist students see shadowing with a feeling of success. Other comments like *“I learned to choose my words more carefully, and I knew it because I realized that I improved when it came to defining something.”*, and *“During this process, I have learned to listen to and understand English sentences, as my ear has become more accustomed to the English language through these practices.”* All of these comments suggest that participants are more aware of focused features of speaking skills.

Following Martinsen, et al. (2017) empirical evidence indicates that pronunciation could have a crucial impact on the effectiveness of communication between language learners and native speakers. One participant said that understood that *“Words can undergo certain sound alterations depending on the word that follows.”*

5- As a future English teacher, how would you implement the Shadowing technique? Why?

In response to this open-ended question (Research question 3) all participants satisfactorily agree on a strong consideration of the implementation of Shadowing in their future teaching practice. The individuals in this study emphasize four factors for utilizing shadowing, including flexibility, vocabulary acquisition, fluency, and motivation.

Firstly, the answered based on the perception of fluency development suggest that shadowing technique *“It would greatly help my students to have a learning experience tailored to their learning needs and, of course, taking advantage of the flexibility that technology offers today.”*

Another relevant element was vocabulary. A group of students said that the strategy to improve speaking skills would be used *“because in this way I can expand the vocabulary of my future students.”*

In terms of fluency, a group of participants regarded shadowing as an excellent activity to improve the speed of their speech. *“... I would like my students to have a very good fluency and to achieve their objectives.”*. *“...to seek the fluency of my future students.”* One participant manifested that *“In addition to being a technique that greatly aids in fluency, I would also implement it because it is a good way to break away from the monotony of classes.”*

The last one feature was an increase in students' motivation to learn the language. It was mentioned that students can find shadowing compelling and helpful. *“because I believe that it is a technique that students do not find boring, and that, from my point of view, is very important in the learning process”*, and *“this technique is very helpful and, moreover, it doesn't make the student feel pressured or overwhelmed in comparison to other techniques.”*

5. Conclusion

The shadowing technique has proven to be a valuable tool for enhancing speaking skills in pre-service English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers. Through exploring the perspectives of these pre-service teachers, we have discovered that shadowing provides them with a unique opportunity to develop their fluency, pronunciation, and intonation in the target language.

The study revealed that participants considered shadowing to allow for the internalization of linguistic patterns and grammatical structures in a more natural and automatic way. Moreover, many highlighted that this technique helped improve their listening comprehension and their ability to replicate the rhythm and intonation of native speakers.

Furthermore, engagement in shadowing also resulted in increased confidence and self-efficacy among future teachers as it provided them with a safe and pressure-free environment for language practice. This boost in self-confidence is considered crucial for fostering a positive and motivating learning environment in the classroom.

However, it is important to note that shadowing should be complemented with other teaching strategies and oral practice to achieve a well-rounded development of students' communicative skills. Additionally, it is essential for pre-service

teachers to receive proper guidance on how to effectively implement this technique in the classroom and tailor it to the needs and characteristics of their students.

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