

Investigating the Effectiveness of Shadowing as a Listening Technique in Enhancing Listening Comprehension of Undergraduate English as a Second Language Learners

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Abstract

Shadowing is an advanced language learning technique that learners can use independently to improve their intonation and pronunciation. Through this technique, the learners are allowed to listen to a model (i.e., a video or audio of someone speaking) and repeat what is said in real-time. Unlike in the listen-pause-repeat method of yesteryear, here one precisely repeats every utterance, sound by sound, word by word, immediately after they are heard. Based on an experiment involving shadowing, this study examines the impact of shadowing on enhancing listening comprehension among a group of undergraduate English as a Second Language (ESL) learners in the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Kelaniya. The research employed a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative data through pre- and post-tests and structured interviews to evaluate the efficacy of shadowing in enhancing learners' listening comprehension skills, while also documenting their perceptions of shadowing as a listening technique. The quantitative findings from the independent sample t-tests indicated a substantial enhancement of the listening comprehension scores during the post-test, with mean scores of 8.10 for the experimental group and 5.50 for the control group. The statistical study validated the importance of these techniques ($p = 0.000$). The qualitative results gathered from interviews highlighted the students' initial scepticism and curiosity, increased focus and active engagement in listening, improvement in listening speed and word recognition, enhancement of their pronunciation and intonation, and the positive impact shadowing had on their listening comprehension test performance as the emerging themes. These results underscore the pedagogical value of shadowing as a listening technique under an interactive and cognitively engaging approach to ESL listening instruction. Hence, this study adds to the existing literature on listening instruction and provides practical implications for ESL instructors seeking to integrate the shadowing technique into their teaching practices.

Keywords: ESL learners; Listening comprehension; Shadowing listening technique; Mixed methods approach

Introduction

The acquisition of a second or foreign language is widely acknowledged as one of the most cognitively challenging endeavors an individual may experience, involving the mastery of listening, speaking,

reading, and writing (VanPatten, 2004). In the Sri Lankan context, despite years of formal English instruction, many adult English as a Second Language (ESL) learners, especially at the university level, struggle with listening comprehension, an essential skill for real-time communication in English (Karunaratne, 2009). This persistent difficulty can be attributed to traditional teaching techniques that often emphasize grammar, vocabulary, and passive listening exercises, rather than engaging learners in active listening tasks (Field, 2008). Consequently, researchers have suggested incorporating innovative techniques such as the shadowing listening technique, which requires learners to repeat spoken language immediately after hearing it to enhance real-time language processing and comprehension (Hamada, 2015).

Research on the theoretical and pedagogical aspects of using the shadowing listening technique has been extended to studies in both ESL and EFL contexts. Many studies have examined using the shadowing listening technique among EFL university undergraduates (Hamada, 2012; Lestari, 2020; Zuhriyah, 2016), high school students (Hamada, 2011; Villavicencio & Serrano, 2023), and elementary school kids (Zaidan, 2021) in enhancing listening skills. Similarly, studies have been conducted in ESL/EFL contexts on the effects of using the shadowing listening technique for enhancing bottom-up skills (Hamada, 2015) as well as L2 pronunciation (Foote & McDonough, 2017). Clearly, research on utilizing the shadowing listening technique for language development has been attempted from various pedagogical and theoretical angles. Nevertheless, there is a gap in the existing literature regarding effective strategies to enhance listening skills in the Sri Lankan context. Therefore, this research aims to address this gap by investigating the potential impact of incorporating the shadowing listening technique into language teaching to enhance the listening comprehension of ESL undergraduates at the University of Kelaniya. By incorporating the shadowing listening technique into language teaching, this study aims to offer a novel approach to improve listening proficiency among ESL undergraduates in Sri Lanka. Hence, this study addresses the following research questions:

- How effective is the use of shadowing as a listening technique in enhancing the listening comprehension skills of undergraduate ESL learners?
- What are the perceptions of undergraduate ESL learners regarding the use of the shadowing listening technique to enhance their listening comprehension skills?

Materials and Methods

Study Design

In this study, a mixed-methods research framework is used to investigate the effectiveness of the shadowing listening technique in enhancing the listening comprehension skills of undergraduate ESL learners. The research design follows an experimental study, incorporating both a control and an experimental group.

Population and Sample

The purposive sample in this study comprises 40 ESL undergraduates (20 students from one class), a mix of males and females aged 19 years or older, at the Faculty of Humanities, who are enrolled in the English for Humanities course. This sample depicts the population of ESL undergraduates in Sri Lanka. This will be an ideal sample for this study because undergraduates in the Faculty of Humanities are more likely to engage with language-related studies, requiring advanced language proficiency in terms of all four skills to succeed in their career fields.

Data Collection Tools

The research instruments include a pre-test, a post-test, and structured interviews with a focus group of six participants from the experimental group. This focus group was randomly selected based on the students with the highest average post-test score. Each paper consisted of five multiple-choice items and five gap-filling items, while the allotted time to complete the paper was 20 minutes. The interview

questionnaire comprised eight open-ended questions designed based on Castillo-Montoya's (2016) Interview Protocol Refinement (IPR) Framework. Quantitative data gathered from the pre-test and post-test results measure the effectiveness of the shadowing listening technique, while qualitative data from structured interviews provide insights into learners' perceptions of the technique. The treatment was conducted over a period of five weeks.

Data Analysis

Quantitative analysis involves evaluating the listening comprehension of each student during both pre- and post-tests. Then, the scores obtained in the pre-test and post-test were analyzed using independent and paired-sample t-tests to scrutinize the significant difference in their performance.

Qualitative analysis of the interviews underwent Braun and Clarke's (2006) inductive approach of Thematic Analysis (TA) to explore patterns in learners' perceptions.

Results

Quantitative Results

The study aimed to evaluate the effect of the shadowing listening technique on the listening comprehension of ESL learners. Pre-test and post-test scores were utilised to assess listening comprehension enhancement via t-test analysis.

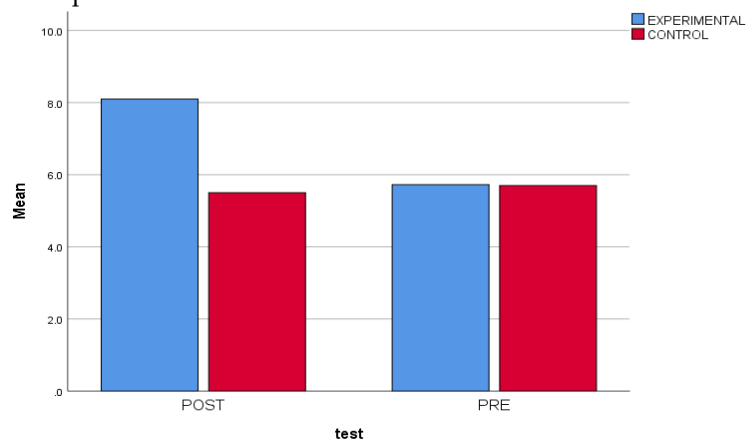
Table 1: Independent sample statistics of the pre-test

PRE-TEST	Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	P-value
	Experimental	20	5.725	1.3521	0.952
	Control	20	5.700	1.2503	

Table 2: Independent sample statistics of the post-test

POST-TEST	Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	P-value
	Experimental	20	8.10	1.210	0.000
	Control	20	5.50	1.357	

Figure 1: Pre-test and post-test mean score differences



According to Table 1, the mean pre-test score was 5.72 in the experimental group, whereas 5.70 in the control group. This negligible difference (0.025) suggests that both groups started with similar baseline

listening comprehension skills before the treatment. The experimental group's mean, however, increased significantly to 8.10 following the intervention, indicating notable improvement (Figure 1). Conversely, there was no improvement in the control group's mean score, which remained nearly the same at 5.50. Hence, the experimental group's mean escalated by approximately 2.38 points from the pre-test to the post-test, whereas the control group's mean decreased slightly by 0.20 points. The standard deviation for the experimental group (1.3521) and control group (1.2503) indicates that the initial listening scores of both groups were similarly variable.

However, after the intervention, the experimental group depicted a decreased score of 1.210, suggesting that scores became more consistent. This means the participants performed more uniformly in their post-test. Conversely, the control group's standard deviation increased to 1.357, indicating slightly more variation in performance after the post-test, despite the lack of significant improvement. Additionally, the p-value (Sig. 2-tailed) for the post-test is 0.000, which is well below the standard significance threshold of 0.05. This further confirms that the experimental and control groups' post-test results varied statistically significantly, implying that there is a difference between the scores obtained by the learners in the control and experimental groups.

In addition to the statistical significance, the effect size was also calculated to determine the practical significance of the difference between the post-test of the experimental and control groups. The Cohen's d score for this study was 1.62, which represents a very large effect size using Cohen's (1988) criteria (0.2 = small, 0.5 = medium, 0.8 = large, > 1.00 = very large). This suggests that the shadowing technique did not merely produce a statistically significant improvement but also had a substantial impact on learners' listening comprehension. The large effect size confirms that the improvement in the experimental group's performance is not only reliable but also educationally meaningful. Therefore, the findings provide strong evidence that shadowing is an effective instructional strategy for enhancing listening comprehension among adult ESL learners.

Qualitative Results

The qualitative analysis in this study is based on the responses obtained through structured interviews. Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) identified five principal themes that summarise students' experiences with the shadowing listening technique: Initial scepticism and curiosity, increased focus and active engagement in listening, improvement in listening speed and word recognition, enhancement of pronunciation and intonation, and positive impact on listening comprehension test performance. These topics illustrate the beneficial effects and the difficulties faced by students throughout the execution of the shadowing listening technique (Appendix A).

A common theme among participants was an initial sense of scepticism or nervousness about the shadowing listening technique. This was a notable theme throughout the analysis, indicating that while learners are open to new methods, they also have initial apprehensions regarding the feasibility of the approaches. Unlike passive listening exercises, such as listening to audiobooks, the shadowing listening technique required active engagement (Vandergrift & Goh, 2012), which led to noticeable improvements in comprehension. Therefore, the second theme reflects that the shadowing listening technique facilitated increased concentration and active participation during the listening process, which is necessary for effective listening comprehension development. Moreover, the responses scrutinize the fact that the shadowing listening approach facilitates the development of micro-listening skills, including quick word recognition and faster processing of spoken language, which enables learners to comprehend spoken English more efficiently. Additionally, the respondents indicate that the shadowing listening technique facilitated the enhancement of listening comprehension skills as well as exposed the learners to natural language use, contributing to their speaking and listening accuracy. Ultimately, the learners believe that shadowing helped them in answering comprehension questions

more effectively, suggesting a direct correlation between the technique and improved performance on listening assessments.

Discussion

This study's quantitative findings indicate that the shadowing listening technique significantly enhances listening comprehension in ESL learners. The significant enhancement in post-test scores, especially the difference between the mean test scores of the experimental (8.10) and control groups (5.50), underscores the efficacy of the shadowing listening strategy.

These results corroborate Sumarsih's study (2017), which found that the shadowing listening technique enhances learners' capacity to decode spoken input more efficiently, resulting in quantifiable improvements in listening comprehension. In his study, a sample of EFL undergraduates from Indonesia was used following an experimental research design. The experimental and control groups' mean scores varied greatly, according to the outcomes ($F = 8.98$, $p = 0.004 < 0.05$). This is consistent with the results of the present investigation, which support the idea that shadowing is a useful method for improving the listening comprehension skills of undergraduate learners. Moreover, the findings of this study align with the study conducted by Arbain et al. (2023). Correspondingly, the researchers have used an experimental study with a sample of EFL undergraduates. According to them, the EFL undergraduates in the experimental group who had instruction using the shadowing listening technique performed better than the control group who learned through traditional methods. The t-test analysis of that study depicts the post-test mean score of the experimental group as 15.70, while the control group has a mean score of 11.33. Hence, it is obvious that the results of the study of Arbin et al. (2023) support the results obtained in the present study.

On the other hand, the qualitative findings reveal valuable insights regarding the perceptions of the undergraduate ESL learners towards the shadowing listening technique suggesting that it is an effective strategy to enhance listening comprehension of ESL learners.

The findings of this study align with the previous study conducted by Binarkaheni & Dewangga (2024). According to that study (Binarkaheni & Dewangga, 2024), the researcher has noticed that "the participants were shocked and confused" when introduced to shadowing during cycle one (p. 63). Additionally, they observed that the "participants were frustrated" because the tasks demanded listening and speaking simultaneously (p. 63). However, by the end of cycle two, the participants were enthusiastically engaging with the technique while showing improvement in listening comprehension (Binarkaheni & Dewangga, 2024). Additionally, Arthurson's study (2019) investigated the learners' perceptions regarding the shadowing listening technique through surveys. Accordingly, "seventeen out of nineteen students either agreed or strongly agreed" that shadowing was productive in upgrading their listening skills (Arthurson, 2019, p. 213). Another experimental study by Hamada (2011) used surveys to examine students' insights relevant to the shadowing approach. In that study, "Fourteen students reported that they can listen to sounds more clearly," and "Four students responded that the speed of speech felt slower than before" after exposure to the technique (Hamada, 2011, p. 156). Moreover, Villavicencio & Serranos' study (2023) utilized an experimental design with a survey to investigate perceptions regarding the efficiency of the shadowing method. According to the findings of that study, 85% agreed that their listening skills had improved through the new technique. Hence, it is clear that the shadowing listening technique is a cognitively engaging and pedagogically valuable technique for improving listening comprehension skills among undergraduate ESL learners.

Conclusion

This study examined the effects of the shadowing listening technique as a strategy to enhance listening comprehension in ESL undergraduate learners. The results demonstrate that this tactic markedly improves listening comprehension by promoting better retention, pronunciation, and comprehension skills, supporting the cognitive processes involved in language acquisition. Furthermore, qualitative responses from the structured interview highlighted students' positive attitudes towards shadowing, emphasizing its effectiveness in developing listening fluency and confidence.

The study holds significant contributions for the field of ESL teaching and learning in the Sri Lankan context and beyond. Firstly, addressing the persistent challenge of low English listening proficiency among ESL learners in Sri Lanka is crucial for their academic and professional success. By investigating the impact of incorporating the shadowing listening technique in language teaching, this study will provide insights into innovative strategies that can effectively enhance listening skills among undergraduate ESL learners. The results of this study will have implications for future research, theory development, counseling, and policy formulation in ESL education. By demonstrating the effectiveness of innovative teaching strategies such as the shadowing listening technique, the study will guide educators and policymakers in improving language teaching methodologies, curriculum design, and instructional practices based on learners' perceptions. As the findings depict positive attitudes towards the shadowing listening strategy, the educators can formulate policies focusing on listening skills by incorporating active strategies into the curriculum. In this way, the teaching and learning curriculum may lead to a whole different path with active learning tasks instead of boring repetitive strategies.

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Appendix A – Thematic Analysis Table

Participant responses	Generated codes	Themes
Participant 1: "I wasn't sure if I could keep up with the speaker at first..."	Initial uncertainty	Initial skepticism & curiosity
Participant 3: "I was excited to try something new, but at the same time, I was unsure if I could keep up with a native like speaker..."	Curiosity & hesitation	
Participant 4: "It trained my brain to listen more actively..."	Active listening	Increased focus and active engagement
Participant 1: "Shadowing really helped me focus more on spoken English..."	Improved focus on speech	
Participant 2: "Yes, my listening speed improved significantly, and I also became more accurate in recognizing words, even in fast conversations..."	Improved accuracy in word recognition	Improvement in listening speed and word recognition
Participant 4: "It definitely helped me improve my listening speed and accuracy..."	Faster comprehension	
Participant 5: "I could mimic the rise and fall of sentences better".	Improved intonation awareness	Enhancement of pronunciation and intonation
Participant 6: "Shadowing helped me pronounce words like native speakers..."	Improved pronunciation	
Participant 1: "Definitely! I was able to answer comprehension questions faster and understood the speaker's words more clearly compared to the pre-test..."	Improved test performance	Positive impact on listening comprehension test performance
Participant 2: "Yes, I believe shadowing helped me perform better on the post-test".	Faster comprehension processing	