



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Section: *Language and Linguistics*

Published by Scientific-Board
LLC in the Research Journal in
Translation, Literature, Linguistics,
and Education (RJTLLE). Volume 1,
Issue 4, 2025.

ISSN: 3067-6290 (Online)
3068-8450 (Print)

Article Details

Received: 18 August 2025

Revised: 27 August 2025

Accepted: 30 September 2025

Published: 29 October 2025

Conflict of Interest: The author/s
declared no conflict of interest.



How to Cite:

Hong, L. V. N., Yen, N. H., &
Cong, B. H. (2025). The impact of
shadowing practice on improving
speaking skills. *Research Journal in
Translation, Literature, Linguistics,
and Education*, 1(4), 1-7. [https://doi.
org/10.64120/ed7sqs07](https://doi.org/10.64120/ed7sqs07)

The impact of shadowing practice on improving speaking skills

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Abstract

English-speaking skills are definitely crucial for learners in the context of global integration and the development of digital technology. Teaching speaking skills – one of the productive skills to students, however, has always been a challenging task for all teachers. This study examined the impact of shadowing practice on enhancing English speaking skills among English-major students at Nha Trang University. The study's primary objective is to assess the effects of the shadowing practice approach on language learners' pronunciation, intonation, fluency, vocabulary, and confidence. 100 second-year English-major students participated in the study. The research methodology follows a quasi-experimental research approach, incorporating both a pre-test and a post-test, as well as interviews. The findings showed significant improvements in several elements of speaking performance. These results showed that this method not only improved English-speaking skills but also developed a base of positive psychological aspects, which can be considered an essential boost for effective communication. The study offers practical pedagogical implications for language instructors to enhance students' communication skills and for language learners.

Keywords: language instructors, language learners, shadowing practice, speaking skills



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1. Introduction

English-speaking skills are among the most important skills in today's rapidly developing era, not only for studying but also for future careers. In the context of international integration and global commerce, where countries increasingly cooperate, being able to communicate well in English helps students improve their academic performance and increases their chances of finding jobs both in their home country and in other developing nations. However, speaking is not an easy skill to master. According to Bueno, Madrid, and McLaren (2006), the most difficult skill is speaking, which learners have to challenge when they learn a language. Therefore, developing English speaking skills is always one of the most important goals in learning another language, especially nowadays, where English is widely regarded as a lingua franca for communication. Following this, to foster English language speaking skills, various teaching methods and self-learning approaches have been invented, and shadowing practice can be considered one of the most noticeable innovations. Shadowing is a language learning technique in which learners immediately repeat what they hear, attempting to mimic the speaker's rhythm, pronunciation, and intonation without delay. Originally developed in interpreter training, shadowing has gained popularity as a practical tool in foreign language instruction, particularly for improving speaking and listening skills (Lambert, 1992). The theoretical foundation of shadowing lies in the input hypothesis (Krashen, 1985), which emphasises the importance of exposure to comprehensible input. Shadowing allows learners to not only process input aurally but also to actively engage with it by producing immediate output. This dual engagement facilitates the development of phonological awareness, listening comprehension, and fluency (Kadota, 2019).

At some universities in Vietnam, the English-speaking skills-related challenges tend to become one of the most significant obstacles for language learners, especially English-major students. In particular, at Nha Trang University, despite being trained for 2 years, sophomores of the English language faculty have also experienced and encountered numerous difficulties, including linguistic and psychological aspects, in using English to communicate. This study aimed to investigate the effectiveness of shadowing practice in enhancing the speaking skills of language learners and contributing to the development of English-speaking methodology.

2. Literature review

2.1. Definition of Speaking

David Nunan (2003) defined speaking as a skill which produces sounds, including making organised statements to convey meaning. Additionally, speaking is also considered the process of creating and sharing meaning through the use of spoken words and non-verbal expressions, in various situations (Chaney & Burk, 1998). According to Brown (1994), this researcher stated that speaking was an interactive process with the purpose of building meaning, including the following steps: producing, receiving, and processing information. The form and meaning of spoken language depend on the context in which it happens, the people involved, and the purpose of speaking. This interactive process is often spontaneous, flexible, and constantly changing. Lynne Cameron (2001) also asserted that speaking skills are not only about pronouncing words but also about being a meaningful communication process in specific social settings, and are influenced by the conversation context. Speaking is considered one of the most complex and flexible skills, requiring the combination of several factors, including cognitive, physical, and socio-cultural aspects. (Anne Burns, 2019).

2.2. Shadowing method

2.2.1. Definition

Rost and Wilson (2013) defined shadowing as repeating everything or part of the speech that the speaker has just said. This means that by repeating the speech of native speakers, learners cannot only improve their focus, listening, and immediate repetition skills, but also enhance their fluency and understanding of the language. According to Yonezawa and Ware (2008), shadowing is a method of practising English

speaking by repeating phrases or even sentences after listening to an English passage, without looking at the text. Takeuchi et al. (2021) defined the shadowing method as a listening activity or task, in which the learner needs to closely follow the speech they have heard and then try to quickly repeat it precisely. According to Hamada (2012), the Shadowing method is a listening and speaking practice where learners immediately repeat what they hear. Learners will wear headphones and repeat each phrase or sentence right after hearing it. In shadowing, learners do not rely on written texts, but they have to depend completely on their listening and reaction skills. Additionally, this method requires learners to stay focused and respond quickly to accurately produce the pronunciation and intonation after hearing each sentence. By practising shadowing regularly, learners can improve both their listening comprehension and their ability to pronounce and speak with more natural rhythm and intonation.

2.2.2. Benefits of the shadowing method

Hamada (2015), Kadota (2007) suggested that the Shadowing method brings manifold benefits to the process of learning a foreign language, especially to the two skills of listening and speaking. More specifically, practising with the Shadowing method helps improve the ability to convey native speech, which means the ability to distinguish and understand what native speakers say, including pronunciation, rhythm, intonation, stress in speech, as well as authentic communication. Moreover, practicing the Shadowing method contributes to increasing short-term memory capacity. When learners continuously listen to and immediately repeat what native speakers say, they force their brains to work faster and more accurately, which helps enhance their ability to memorize and process language in a short time.

2.3. Confidence and anxiety in oral communication

According to Muna (2019), self-confidence plays an important role in oral communication. However, in reality, many students tend to lack confidence when using English to communicate due to some objective factors. Therefore, when learning a language, learners must first maintain a certain level of confidence. MacIntyre and Gardner (1994) asserted that anxiety in language learning is defined as a type of emotional state including feelings of tension, worry, and nervousness, especially in situations where learners have to use a language that is not their mother tongue. The contexts where language use is required include skills such as speaking, listening, and writing, and these skills require learners to react quickly in the target language, especially in speaking. This often causes learners to fall into a state of anxiety when they have to show their language ability and vocabulary. The feeling of anxiety here is a form of fear that occurs when language learners face the demands of using the language, especially in real-life communication situations, where they are expected to respond almost accurately, confidently, and effectively. This feeling of anxiety and tension strongly affects the learners' confidence in real communication situations.

2.4. Relevant studies and research gap

Dinda Aulya Rahmah (2023) carried out a study regarding the role of the shadowing technique in improving students' pronunciation skills, and he concluded that the participants could truly enhance their intonation, word stress and pronunciation. Raouia Manseur (2015) also conducted a similar study focusing on exploring the Shadowing method in developing English speaking skills of EFL students. He mentioned that Shadowing had a clearly positive impact on speaking ability, especially in fluency, pronunciation, language reflex, and confidence. Most students who practiced with the Shadowing technique said it was an effective method, easy to follow, and helped increase their motivation to learn. In Vietnam, this research field has also tended to receive some identical features. Nguyễn Thị Ánh Nguyệt and Nguyễn Phương Anh (2024), two researchers in Vietnam, also investigated the effectiveness of the shadowing practice method in teaching English speaking skills for third-year students at Ha Noi Metropolitan University. The results showed that most students had clear improvements in pronunciation, building sentences, and fluency when they practiced using the Shadowing method. Most students pointed out that getting frequent feedback from instructors was one of the most important

factors to improve their Shadowing skills. Besides, combining Shadowing with other activities like role-playing and dialogues would make the method more effective.

Although a variety of previous studies have explored the roles, benefits, and challenges of using the Shadowing method in practicing English speaking skills, there is still a lack of insight into psychological factors, especially learners' confidence and anxiety after applying this method. This study aims to fill that gap by focusing on sophomore English students at Nha Trang University. These students have already spent one year getting used to the academic environment and are now in the stage where they need to improve their speaking skills to meet the higher demands of language learning. In particular, the Shadowing method was introduced and applied in the Speaking 1 course during the first semester of the academic year. Therefore, studying the impact of this method in the actual learning context at Nha Trang University is necessary, reflecting the teaching conditions, learning environment, and psychological state of second-year students. From the findings, the most appropriate directions can be suggested to improve the effectiveness of teaching and learning speaking skills.

3. Research methodology

This study used a quasi-experimental research design to investigate the effectiveness of shadowing practice in improving the English-speaking skills of English-major students at Nha Trang University. 100 second-year English-major students chosen randomly participated in the study. The participants were categorised into two groups: an experimental group ($n = 50$), practising the shadowing method, and a control group ($n = 50$), following traditional speaking practice without the shadowing approach.

3.1. Instruments

A speaking test covering all relevant aspects, including pronunciation, intonation, fluency, vocabulary, and confidence, was designed as a pre-test and a post-test. The test was evaluated using the IELTS Speaking criteria rubric. Additionally, depth interviews were implemented and deployed afterward to assess the participants' confidence and motivation following the training.

3.2. Procedure

The experiment lasted eight weeks. During the period, the experimental group practised the shadowing method three times a week, with 45 minutes per session. Materials consisted of some authentic English audio recordings (focusing on relevant-level short talks and speeches on TED talks and podcasts). Students were guided to listen to the recordings, then repeat (synchronous shadowing) and then with a slight delay (delayed shadowing). The control group, in contrast, participated in different normal speaking practice activities.

4. Findings and data analysis

4.1. Quantitative Results

Table 1: Pre-test and Post-test Mean Scores of Experimental and Control Groups Across Speaking Skill Components

Speaking Skill	Experimental Group Pre-test	Experimental Group Post-test	Control Group Pre-test	Control Group Post-test
Pronunciation	5.2	6.7	5.1	5.6
Intonation	5.1	6.5	5.0	5.5
Fluency	5.3	6.9	5.2	5.7
Vocabulary	5.4	6.8	5.3	5.8
Confidence	5.0	6.6	5.0	5.5

(Scores are based on a 1–9 scale from IELTS Speaking descriptors)

The pre-test results revealed that the two classified groups possessed quite equivalent results across all speaking skill elements, with differences appearing ($p > .05$), suggesting that the two groups were at the same levels at the beginning of the intervention.

As can be seen in the data shown, after an eight-week training period, the experimental group exhibited noticeable gains in all five elements. In particular, pronunciation scores increased from a mean of 5.2 to 6.7, intonation from 5.1 to 6.5, fluency from 5.3 to 6.9, vocabulary from 5.4 to 6.8, and confidence from 5.0 to 6.6. These changes, ranging from 1.3 to 1.6 points on a 9-point scale, significantly reflected the improvements.

On the other hand, the control group presented nearly no improvements. Their scores went up by approximately 0.4 to 0.5 points in five components. In detail, the pronunciation score rose slightly from 5.1 to 5.6, and confidence from 5.0 to 5.5. These features proved that traditional speaking activities might be insufficient for speaking skill development.

Of the 5 skills, it can be seen that Fluency and Vocabulary were dramatically varied when comparing the 2 groups. Fluency normally represents the output skills, which shows that shadowing performs as a natural input mechanism in language acquisition.

4.2. Qualitative Results

Responses from the interviews proved that shadowing not only enhanced speaking skills but also positively changed the learners' confidence and motivation. Students frequently mentioned that this method helped them "use English to communicate more naturally," "reduce fillers and unnatural pauses," and "gain courage to present their opinions in front of others."

Particularly, the majority of the participants in the experimental group believed that shadowing improved the accuracy and naturalness of their speech. Students said that repeating after listening already assisted them in noticing subtle aspects of pronunciation, stress, and intonation patterns that they could not get involved in during classroom-based speaking activities. One student confirmed:

"Before practising this approach, I was instructed on all the rules of pronunciation, but I could not apply them when I spoke. After the training, I feel that my English is getting better and more natural and closer to native communication."

Another student emphasized that shadowing could give them opportunities to practice correct intonation:

"Now when I communicate, I don't sound like I follow any templates or models. I can produce natural voice rise and fall."

These changes already draw a different picture of speaking improvement. From the interview, it can be seen that the most striking findings relate to psychological aspects. Many students in the experimental group explained that the repetitive speech allowed them to practice in a low-anxiety environment, reducing their fear of making mistakes. For example, one respondent claimed:

"At first, I always worried about how I spoke, and I tended to be afraid of losing face in front of the crowds. After practicing this method, I realised I didn't feel scared anymore and I was really confident."

Some students also asserted that shadowing could obviously diminish their speaking anxiety when using English to communicate with classmates or their teachers. One student depicted shadowing as a "confidence mirror," and by practising regularly, the student could gain what they wanted. This already proved the crucial role of shadowing in lifting language barriers, which can be considered a challenge for language learners.

5. Discussion

The findings prove that the shadowing method is considered an effective approach for developing English speaking skills. The significant improvements in pronunciation, intonation, fluency, and vocabulary can reveal a great connection with the authentic speech pattern, thereby boosting communicative competence. Additionally, the improvement in confidence is noticeable. In second language acquisition, speaking anxiety is indispensable, so by engaging in comprehensible input, learners gradually overcome the psychological factors and tend to be more willing to communicate.

In contrast, the control group's achievements reveal the disadvantages of the conventional speaking practice method. Shadowing, on the other hand, provides learners with an entirely different experience related to the combination of speaking and listening.

In terms of pedagogical implications, English language instructors also received some benefits from the findings. Following this, teachers may combine the shadowing method into their lesson plans and adjust the appropriate levels of authentic materials, ranging from news to lectures at universities. It is necessary to structure the practice sessions, beginning with simple texts to more complex documents. This practice approach is extremely suitable with students struggling with fluency and confidence. Once they engage in repeating and imitating, the learners can gradually build the mindsets and get over their psychological aspects.

6. Conclusion

This paper confirmed the impacts of the shadowing method on improving and enhancing the speaking skills of English-major students at Nha Trang University. In particular, the Shadowing method is not only a technique that helps improve speaking, but also a tool that supports students in building confidence while using English to communicate. To achieve the best results, it is necessary to have a flexible and active connection between students, instructors and even the materials used. It is suggested that English teachers should always find new ideas, strategies, or techniques in teaching and learning so that students are interested in taking part actively in their learning process.

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