

Shadowing and Japanese EFL Learners: An Examination of Shadowing as a Language-learning Activity for Japanese Learners

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Abstract

This paper examines the theoretical support for shadowing as a language-learning activity to promote fluency, and how to make a principled choice from among the various types of shadowing activity (silent, out loud, simultaneous, delayed, complete, selective, interactive, non-interactive).

1.0 The context

During each of my first classes of my 2017 spring semester English courses, in what was for me a new teaching context, I asked students to individually complete short anonymous questionnaires about their language-learning motivation, background, habits, and strengths and weaknesses. The 95 respondents were all Japanese, and included 70 first-year students from the humanities department and 25 second-year students from a mix of other departments and faculties.

1.1 As identified by learners, speaking and listening are the biggest needs

One of the questions was (in Japanese, as I wasn't yet sure of the learners' proficiency) 'what is your weak point with English?'. The question explicitly invited multiple written answers. Prior questions mentioned grammar, vocabulary, speaking, reading comprehension, reading speed, listening, writing, motivation, conversational skills, fluency, and pronunciation, so learners were likely primed to prioritize these as answers.

No interesting differences were observed in responses to this question between either year of study or department. The most popular responses overall were 'speaking' (72), 'listening' (54), and 'conversational skills' (33), which itself centrally involves speaking and listening, followed by a range of responses in the low 20s.

The following question, 'what do you think you most need to improve? Why?', met somewhat similar

answers: ‘speaking’ (69) and ‘listening’ (59) were still the clear leaders, though ‘conversational skills’ (18) dropped behind ‘reading comprehension’ (24), ‘vocabulary’ (24), and ‘reading speed’ (22), apparently because these latter are seen as more relevant to assessment (success in examinations and/or high grades in university courses) than conversation is.

Answers to ‘why?’ from learners who answered ‘speaking’ mostly followed two themes: first, that there are no opportunities to practice English speaking or English conversation in Japan or in Japanese high-schools (32); and second, speed – they can’t speak ‘on time’ (19). Answers to ‘why?’ from learners who answered ‘listening’ cited speed (24), not being able to catch words in connected speech (11), and length – forgetting the content from the start while trying to catch the meaning of subsequent sentences (10).

1.2 As identified by the teacher, fluency is the biggest need

My own impression after 15 weeks with these learners is that they should be prioritizing *fluency*. They seem to think that fluency (given in the questionnaire as 流ちょうさ, and explained there as meaning how smoothly and effortlessly you can produce or understand language) is a kind of final polish, a luxury which only advanced English users need think of, whereby someone who has already mastered the key skills of grammar and vocabulary becomes a little faster, smoother, or more natural to listen to. To this way of thinking, so long as there are unfamiliar and exotic new grammar points to study, or unknown vocabulary items to highlight, working on fluency is not a priority. And so learners who take a literal minute to start to reply to ‘What’s your favorite fruit?’ and use their cell-phone to help compose an answer to ‘Do you have any brothers or sisters?’, and therefore have essentially no real-time communicative ability, are busy noting translations of, and working on multiple-choice question involving, words like ‘gyre’ and ‘amygdala’.

In any case, for all that ‘fluency’ may be an unfamiliar label for them, their own characterization of the areas they most need to work on I think points to a major underlying problem with fluency. That is, the difficulty with speaking is that speaking ‘on time’ (in real time, without an uncomfortable pause, before the class or interlocutor moves on) is difficult – and this is a fluency issue. The problem with listening is that fast, connected speech is difficult to catch in real time, and doesn’t leave them enough time or cognitive capacity to remember the meaning – and this is a fluency issue.

So, while allowing that learning new language is important and can be motivating, I think learners need to concentrate more on activities using familiar language to build fluency. These activities should involve an element of repetition, to make sure that the language is familiar and to help build confidence. They should involve speaking and listening, not least to connect directly to learners’ own concerns.

1.3 Suggested language-learning activity to fulfill the need: shadowing

My first thought after processing the questionnaire results was of *shadowing* – repeating language after someone. Shadowing involves repetition, speaking and listening, thereby satisfying both the learners’ demands for speaking and listening and my target of working on fluency. It can be done even in the absence of a ready supply of obliging native speakers, *pace* the learners suggestions that there are no opportunities to practice speaking in Japan, and can be done alone or in company with no expense or special materials beyond an internet-connected phone.

So, in the respective second classes, during a time set aside to discuss the results of the questionnaire and how the class and individuals could best address the issues revealed, I asked the learners whether they ever practice ‘shadowing’ with audio or video materials. No-one seemed to know what shadowing was, so I explained that shadowing involves repeating language after someone. I briefly modelled shadowing part of an imaginary YouTube news clip, suggested it was a way to practice both listening and speaking, and asked the learners whether they’d try it.

- Presenter: The UK has just started the process of leaving Europe.
- Learner: [hitting space on keyboard and optionally checking the subtitles] The UK has just started the process of leaving Europe.

Rather surprisingly, the answer was ‘probably not’ (interpreting the silence, avoided eye-contact, and eventual comments). Students think, apparently, that shadowing is silly. The class consensus in each case seemed to be that parroting in this way in class shows the teacher you’re paying attention and allows the teacher to check (*en masse* at least) pronunciation and confidence, but is meaningless without a teacher. My surprise at this response notwithstanding, Murphey agrees with these learners that pedagogical use of shadowing may appear to be ‘weird stuff’ (2001: 128).

This paper, then, is a result of my surprise. It seeks to reexamine shadowing and its suitability for the Japanese context.

2.0 Describing shadowing

Murphey (2001: 129-30) notes three continua for describing shadowing:

1. from silent to out loud,
2. from complete to selective (repeating only some words),

3. from non-interactive (can be done using audio or video materials, or teacher-led in a large class) to interactive (is more conversational, including recasts, questions or comments from the listener and some feedback – recasts, corrections, repeats and so on – from the speaker).

2.1 *Prima facie* benefits of shadowing

The basic idea of shadowing is presumably that learners hear the target language twice – once from the speaker and once in their own voice – and this is good because repetition tends to help memory. Also, many benefits claimed for activities like dictation – for example, ‘help[ing] language learning by making learners focus on the language form of phrase and clause level constructions’ (Nation 1995: 97) – can presumably be claimed for shadowing. Further, the need to catch all of the sounds helps ensure that learners pay attention, and promotes short-term retention (see for example Murphey 1993). Shadowing provides opportunities to imitate, and to compare your own voice with that of, the speaker, leading to benefits in pronunciation, stress, and rhythm (see for example Acton 1984) – forms of shadowing are also a well-established form of basic training for simultaneous interpreters (see for example Mikkelson 1992). Finally, it can be done alone, without a teacher or cooperating peer, giving students who may lack confidence an opportunity to practice and improve in a low-stress manner.

2.2 Non-interactive shadowing

Let us start by examining the kind of shadowing a Japanese learner could do at home using a YouTube video or a subtitled DVD. This could lie anywhere on continua 1 and 2, but on continuum 3 is ‘non-interactive’.

Regarding continuum 1, my impression (after shadowing silently, quietly, and at normal volume, for a language I know well and one I know very little of) is that all are broadly similar. Shadowing silently – sub-vocally – still requires that I listen to the audio, understand most of it, hold a chunk briefly in memory, and produce the target language. The good point of shadowing silently is that I could do it on a train without appearing insane, while the bad point is that some phonological or syntactical features that seem easy during a silent rehearsal may turn out to be difficult to produce at full volume (for example, Italian rolled Rs, Chinese tones, and tongue twisters). My conclusion is that anywhere on the continuum is fine, but it’s still worthwhile practicing at full volume from time to time as circumstances permit to make sure that your sub-vocal practice isn’t glossing over some problematic target language feature. A similar comment applies, I think, to other varieties of sub-vocal rehearsal (for example, running through a speech sub-vocally is a useful way of

remembering and improving your fluency with the content, but a prudent speaker would also try rehearsing at full volume).

Regarding continuum 2, complete versus selective shadowing, I would suggest that learners who are largely unused to speaking start with complete shadowing. As per my comments above, this helps hold attention and promotes understanding, helping to focus on the language form, and offering benefits in memory, pronunciation, stress, and rhythm. The added pressure of a requirement that learners recast the language in some way may simply be too much, and offering what may be understood as an option to ignore all those troublesome tenses and prepositions in favor of simply repeating the last heard noun or noun phrase seems pedagogically unwise. However, if and when learners are sufficiently confident with complete shadowing (in the particular domain of the content in question, at least) that it is in danger of becoming boring – when paying careful attention to the speaker and having to consciously struggle to understand begins to change to a more automatic process whereby the learner has enough cognitive capacity remaining to want to comment on or recast the content rather than ‘just parroting’ it – then it is time to change (to a more selective shadowing, or interactive shadowing if the context allows, or to some other activity entirely).

2.3 Interactive (conversational) shadowing

Interactive shadowing, or repeating some part of what a speaker said, usually selectively and/or recast somehow, is a ubiquitous conversational strategy. News interviewers and chat show hosts often provide generously signposted versions (‘So what you’re saying is ...’, ‘So let me see if I got that right ...’, and so on), thereby maximizing the range of listeners who will be able to understand, but it is used far more generally to show that we are listening, how well we are understanding, and our attitude to what (or who) we are listening to.

Here’s part of a conversation overheard (in a café) while writing this paper:

- A: If you tap a word you think is wrong you’ll see options to fix it.
- B: Tap a word I think is wrong and it will be fixed.
- A: No, you’ll see options to fix it. You’ll have to tap an option.
- B: Um ... tap it, and tap an option?
- A: Tap the word, and then tap the right spelling.

Normal conversation is a continual process of micro-summary, confirmation, and elaboration which helps deepen understanding and avoid misunderstanding. Most natural conversations will offer some examples of a

speaker shadowing to show interest, solidarity, sympathy, skepticism, uncertainty, and so on. Some of these attitudes can also be offered by means other than verbal shadowing (posture, facial expression, nonverbal vocalizations, and so on), but shadowing is seemingly the method which offers the most flexible, precise, and powerful feedback. Indeed, selective interactive shadowing is essentially the same as ‘active listening’, explicitly taught for various kinds of counseling and conflict management, and widely considered to improve rapport and mutual understanding (see for example Rogers & Farson 1975).

In terms of communication, feedback to a more proficient speaker allows the speaker to adjust to the listener’s level, chunking to length the partner can repeat, or a complexity the partner can respond to appropriately (Murphey 1995), while feedback to a less proficient speaker can provide recasts and corrections, and more generally serves to reassure the speaker that what they’re saying is comprehensible.

In language learning terms, then, interactive shadowing allows a more proficient conversation partner (sometimes a teacher, but more often a classmate or fellow learner) to keep language in the learner’s ‘zone of proximal development’, where the learner is ready to advance but needs assistance to do so (Murphey 1996, 2001; also Ohta 2001: Chapter 3). Shadowing gives rise to conversational adjustments and negotiations which have a positive effect on negotiation, noticing, intake, and uptake (Murphey 2001; on the benefits of negotiation, see Nation 2001: 123-4).

2.4 Shadowing immediately or after a pause

Considering the issue of just how when the shadower ought to speak – with the speaker, right after the speaker, or when the speaker pauses (as in the interactive variety discussed above) – raises the question of whether we should add a fourth continuum to Murphey’s three:

4. from simultaneous to radically delayed

The limiting cases of such a continuum are simultaneous speaking (no delay at all), and radically delayed (where the speaker finishes an entire conversational turn or speech before pausing for the learner to repeat, or we let the audio or video material play until it finishes before attempting to repeat). An alternative way of characterizing the continuum would be by the length of the language chunks to be shadowed, from zero (start shadowing immediately) to arbitrarily large.

Simultaneous or very-nearly-simultaneous shadowing is presumably only possible with material that has essentially been memorized already, or with a script and easy material – for example when ‘reading together’ in class. If truly simultaneous the activity is arguably not shadowing at all, but ‘parallel reading’ or

some kind of choral rehearsal, but a tiny delay (of class behind teacher, or of less confident reader behind more confident reader) whereby we can make out one to be following or imitating the other in some respect (even just that of speaking speed) makes the activity a form of shadowing. In any case, parallel reading is usually considered a reading fluency and speaking fluency activity suitable for less confident readers or speakers, since reading nearly simultaneously with a more confident reader can help cover small mistakes in decoding or production, while also modelling a target speed. This kind of shadowing does not require audio to be paused repeatedly, which is convenient.

In my own personal experience, and in a not-very-successful classroom experiment, near-simultaneous shadowing is chaotic. Shadowers can hear neither their own voice nor the speaker clearly, losing the ability to imitate and most benefits to pronunciation, stress, and rhythm; and a single syllable out of place results in confusion with no time to recover, so that learners tend to give up part way through. Only using texts which are highly familiar and easy (nearly memorized) does the activity work, and then only as a kind of pacer (modelling the target speed).

A slight delay before shadowing, on the other hand, can involve pausing regularly to allow learners to speak, which allows them to better hear their own voice, and removes the requirement that only familiar and easy material be shadowed. In my experience, short and frequent pauses bracketing short chunks of language (for example: ‘the UK [pause] has just started [pause] ...’) can be useful with difficult or unfamiliar material, and allows more of a language focus. Less frequent pauses bracketing longer chunks of language (whole sentences, say) allows more of a meaning focus and may also involve a shift from complete to selective shadowing (continuum 2), since the focus would normally shift away from reproducing all of the language and towards recreating the key points.

Radically delayed shadowing, where the speaker pauses after some long turn to allow the shadower to repeat, tends for practical reasons to involve less ‘repeating’ and more ‘summarizing’. That is, assuming that learners are not memory prodigies, they will remember at most *some* key points and *some* key language, and need to make a productive effort to recreate what the speaker said. This is itself a useful activity or learning strategy, just as writing short summaries of academic papers you have read is a useful way of checking understanding and assisting memory, but it seems to have more in common with dictogloss activities (where students work to rebuild a text from a few notes or remembered fragments) than with the key shadowing feature of ‘repeating language after someone’. So, when the activity involves not so much repeating (even selectively and with the possibility of some recasts and/or additional comments) as productive re-creation, we might call the activity something like ‘verbal re-creation’ instead. There is, however, no clear line between these two; rather, there is a continuum from complete shadowing to verbal re-creation, marked by increasing selectivity and recasting.

Some researchers understand ‘shadowing’ to be *only* near-simultaneous repetition: see for example Shiki, Mori, Kadota, & Yoshida (2010), who distinguish shadowing (near-simultaneous) from *repeating* (after a delay of 1.5 times the length of a short phrase, mean duration under two seconds), suggesting that while both are ‘basically the practice of repeating sounds’, shadowing forces students to repeat without the time to process the input syntactically or semantically, while a delay before repeating allows syntactic and semantic processing and represents a qualitative difference in the activity (2010: 82).

However, Shiki *et al*’s terminological stipulation seems unhelpful. There is an existing literature on conversational shadowing, negotiating meaning and/or for rapport, as canvassed in section 2.2.2 above, and many conversational turns which are considered in this literature to be examples of shadowing take more than two seconds. I suggest understanding their point as being rather that the cognitive processing demands (and therefore likely the learning opportunities and outcomes) of shadowing differ depending on the delay (or, relatedly, the size of the chunk to be repeated).

As for what the difference in cognitive processing demands is, Shiki *et al*’s suggestion that near-simultaneous shadowing involves no syntactic or semantic processing, while delayed shadowing involves both, seems dubious. Though near-simultaneous shadowing need not involve top-down processing of the kind that requires careful conscious attention, as indicated by the existence of fluent language users who can shadow without conscious attention to meaning or any kind of entry of the content into long-term memory. This lack of conscious attention does not mean, however, *pace* Shiki *et al*, that no syntactic or semantic processing occurs ... only that it does not occur *consciously*. Such processing may, and presumably usually does, occur *subconsciously*. Nearly-simultaneous ‘just parroting’ of a language you don’t know (or of nonsense syllables) is, I suggest, more difficult than the same task in your native language, so subconscious syntactic and semantic processing *is* occurring: you personally are not paying attention to meaning, but sub-personal processing is working on the syntax and using semantic information to help understand the syntax (see for example Bentin, Kutas, & Hillyard 1995). Indeed, this is exactly why near-simultaneous shadowing has been shown to improve ‘student sensitivity to phonological aspects of English’ (Shiki *et al* 2010: 90) and bottom-up processes in listening such as phoneme perception (Hamada 2015).

On the other hand, waiting to repeat (or summarize) a sentence, whether while listening to further content or simply as a short silence before repetition begins, requires that learners hold or repeat the target language in working memory. Although working memory is not identical with consciousness (see for example Velichkovsky 2017), the two are closely related, such that the ability to hold language in working memory (‘phonological loop’) supports reading comprehension, drawing inferences from text (Baddeley 1992), and language learning (Gathercole and Baddeley 1990, 1993; for a language-learning activity exploiting this effect, see Nation & Newton 2006: 66). Especially as the language to be remembered becomes longer or more

complex and becomes larger than working memory can hold, or the pause becomes longer and competing demands are placed on working memory, learners presumably have to seek work-arounds that allow them to remember more (for example, creating mnemonics, writing notes) and/or remember more efficiently (for example, relating the content to existing knowledge, engaging in deep processing to move the ideas to long-term memory, identifying key ideas and concepts and separating from support detail that can be omitted or recreated later). These activities typically have a conscious (personal-level) component, so the shadower becomes aware of the content and therefore of having performed (largely sub-personally) the relevant syntactic and semantic processing. Delayed shadowing therefore involves actively constructing language rather than merely repeating it, adding a more explicitly productive dimension. With production playing an important and accepted role in language acquisition (see for example Ellis 2003: 111-5), we therefore find recommendations that shadowing of this type be used for remembering language or helping make language more automatic (Shiki *et al* 2010: 90; Hamada 2015).

3.0 Implications for practice

Overall, shadowing seems to be a well-supported method suitable for improving fluency, for both low-level aspects (for example, sub-personal phonemic recognition and syntactical processes) and higher-level aspects (for example, the ability to consciously understand, process, and produce target language). It is easy for learners to do and seems to be an ideal exercise for Japanese learners who need to improve fluency.

3.1 Establishing the importance of fluency

While learners realize they have a problem with real-time speaking and listening, they typically do not realize that the underlying problem is largely one of fluency (section 1.2 above). They therefore fail to identify with activities, such as shadowing, designed to improve fluency rather than introduce new language. An important first step is therefore to help learners appreciate the role of fluency (an unfamiliar label) in speaking and listening (their identified primary goals) and how fluency can be improved.

Practicing with numbers can be a good way to make this point to learners. Learners know the English numbers zero to nine. Practice briefly with ‘how many fingers am I holding up?’ or ‘Please hold up [three] fingers!’ and learners will identify as confident with their use. Then, switch to phone numbers, or reading the populations of countries out digit by digit (‘Japan ... one two seven four eight four four five zero’) at a natural speed, and learners quickly realize that a lack of fluency – the time and attention (cognitive load) required to translate between sound and numeral – prevents real-time use. They know the numbers well (better than they

know most of their English vocabulary), but speaking ‘on time’, or catching fast, connected, and long sequences of numbers (the problems identified by learners as most important for them) is difficult. The solution cannot be to learn difficult new language or grammar – the set of target language is basically complete at just ten familiar items – so the solution must be something else. Then, 30 minutes of fluency practice with numbers – shadowing a phone list or a country population table, dictation in pairs, etc. – can improve fluency dramatically.

Having made the point that simple, repetitive, practice can lead to huge improvement in speaking and listening, enough time should remain in class to discuss how these lessons can be applied to other language. The desired conclusion is that simply *understanding* reading passages and listening pieces encountered in class or elsewhere and annotating new language with a translation before moving on (in class, to comprehension questions and then the next section; out of class, directly to something else) is not enough. Rather, some repetitive fluency-building activity using the reading passage or listening piece is indicated.

3.2 Choosing which variety of shadowing to use

Simple fluency-building activities using a text or audio include listening to audio, shadowing audio near-simultaneously, delayed shadowing, verbal re-creation (section 2.4 above), reading text, reading text aloud, reading text and writing or speaking a short summary, and so on.

Many decisions about which activity to use will be decided by the context: do you have audio (listening, shadowing, verbal re-creation) or text (reading silently or aloud, with or without a spoken or written summary) or both (shadowing with a script)? Are you on a busy train (speaking aloud and writing are out) or a quiet room? Are you practicing alone (interactive shadowing is out)?

Assuming that we’ve settled on non-interactive shadowing, whether silently or aloud, the remaining decisions are between complete and selective shadowing, and the length of language chunk to shadow (or of delay). As per my comments above, I recommend starting with complete shadowing (section 2.2) after a very short delay (section 2.4), moving to selective shadowing with a longer delay when more confident with the content. This is, I think, a natural transition: when the shadower is confident enough with the language that they want to add comments or recast to abbreviate content that has become boring, they should do so; or when pausing the audio after each short phrase is tiresome and unnecessary because they can repeat the whole sentence, they should stop so pausing. This mirrors the standard progression in a language classroom of moving from form-focused input and output (notice, reproduce short pieces of language) to meaning-focused input and output (understand and elaborate). When shadowing alone, the learner can control the length of the language chunks and the pauses, and how complete or selective their shadowing is, and should in general be

free to do so, to keep the activity interesting.

How many repetitions will give the best fluency gain return on time spent without becoming boring depends on the language and the learner, and most learners will probably be sensitive to the difference between repeating an activity while their fluency continues to improve and repeating despite having reached a plateau (four times is a reasonable guide – see for example Shiki *et al* 2010: 85-7).

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