

## *Original Paper*

# An Empirical Study of Shadowing in College English Listening Teaching

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### **Abstract**

*Shadowing is one of the main means of simultaneous interpreting practice, and many studies have combined it with English listening teaching. This paper takes first-year students as the research object, studies the students' cognitive psychology of shadowing by designing a questionnaire, and explores the practicality of the method by comparing the pre and post-test scores. The results show that shadowing plays a positive role in English listening teaching.*

### **Keywords**

*Shadowing, Listening Teaching, College English*

### **1. Introduction**

College English listening teaching has always occupied an important position in language learning. To improve students' listening skills more effectively, teachers have adopted a variety of ways to enrich listening teaching means and methods. As a method widely used in interpreting training, shadowing has always attracted much attention. Shadowing is a rhythmic acoustic tracking task that requires the practitioner to sound out stimulus signals presented in sound instantly, namely to repeat the information you heard verbatim in the same language (Lambert, 1988). In recent years, scholars have tried to apply the shadowing training method to listening instruction. It has been found that the shadowing training method has a positive effect on students' listening sound recognition ability, comprehension ability, and concentration, and it is effective in improving students' English listening and speaking abilities, which helps to improve students' comprehensive level of listening (He, 2014; Liu et al., 2019; Zhang, 2021). To a certain extent, the shadowing training method can enhance junior high school students' ability and confidence in applying listening strategies, and provide new ideas for teachers to explore efficient listening teaching modes (Zhang et al., 2021).

However, most of the research on the application of shadowing to listening is mainly focused on

middle school students, and there are few applications in university listening teaching. This study applies the shadowing training method to university listening teaching, taking 33 non-English major freshmen students as the target group. After six weeks of shadowing training, it used a questionnaire to find out the students' cognitive psychology of the method and compared the changes in students' performance before and after the training, intending to provide English teachers and researchers with references and revelations about the practice of listening teaching.

## **2. Research Design**

This study used a combination of qualitative and quantitative research by first teaching students a one-and-a-half-month shadowing training, followed by a questionnaire survey of students participating in that training, and analysis of students' pre and post-test scores.

### *2.1 Research Questions*

- 1) Do students have positive attitudes towards the application of shadowing training to listening instruction?
- 2) Does shadowing training improve students' English listening skills?

### *2.2 Research Object*

The objects of the study are freshmen majoring in electronic science and technology in a provincial university, from a natural class with a total of 33 students, of whom 25 are male and 8 are female. The students in this class all have 10 years of English learning experience, and there is no significant difference between their English scores in the college entrance examination and between their scores in the entrance English placement test, and they will all take College English Test 4 at the end of the semester.

### *2.3 Research Tools*

#### (1) Shadowing Exercise Materials

All the materials were derived from previous years' listening materials of CET-4, and the types of materials included news, long dialogues, and short essays for a total of 18 pieces. During one and a half months, each student carried out 3 times a week, a total of 18 times of shadowing training.

#### (2) Questionnaire

The questionnaire contained five questions, all of which were subjective and open-ended. It deals with the students' perceptions and psychology of the training method after six weeks of shadowing, namely a total of 18 listening recordings.

### *2.4 Data Analysis*

The data sources were divided into two categories. One is the responses to the subjective open-ended questions in the questionnaire. The second is the results of the listening exams. The first listening exam results came from the listening scores of the final exam conducted by the students at the beginning of the semester (the final exam of the previous semester was postponed to the beginning of the current semester due to the pandemic), with a total score of 25 points. The second listening test scores came

from the students' listening scores tested using a set of previous year's CET-4 questions after 6 weeks of shadowing training, with a total score of 35. The study used SPSS 27.0 software to analyze whether there was a significant difference between the pre- and post-test scores of the shadowing training, to observe the effectiveness of this method in improving students' listening scores.

### 3. Result and Discussion

#### 3.1 Textual Analysis Based on Questionnaires

Limited to space, given the similarity of some students' feelings, this paper only takes representative responses from among them to be analyzed, and the student representatives (S1, S2, etc.) do not correspond to each other between the questions, but are only used for sequencing purposes.

(1) How is the shadowing training different from the way you used to practice English listening?

S1	In the past, the practice method was just listening with a purpose with questions, and I wouldn't figure out what the original listening text said. Shadowing requires simulating the tone, intonation, linking, reduction, etc. of the original recording to read out word by word, which is much more demanding and also helps to understand the general idea of the whole piece of listening material.
S2	While previous listening training only involved listening, shadowing training requires not only listening, but also memorizing what you hear and repeating it through your mouth, and even more so, imitating the intonation and speed of the interlocutor.
S3	It used to be purely drilled on a large number of questions. Shadowing allows for a clearer understanding of linking and other details that you wouldn't normally pay attention to.
S4	It used to be practiced by listening and reading out loud. Shadowing pays more attention to details and standards.
S5	In the past, it was simply a matter of following along with a tape recorder to form a muscle memory. Shadowing is a completely innovative way, which involves imitating the tone of voice and also bettering one's understanding of the meaning of the listening material.

The previous traditional mode of listening teaching makes students' practice methods relatively single, focusing mainly on pure listening training and seldom combining listening and speaking. However, in real English dialogues, pronunciation variations such as linking, reduction, assimilation, and loss of explosion are inevitable. Shadowing training allows students to experience such pronunciation and become familiar with the intonation of native English speakers, which helps them to react more quickly and understand the content of the dialogues when listening to the recordings and identifying the sounds. Feedback from the students showed that most of them have recognized the significant advantages of

shadowing, such as “focusing on details such as linking and reduction” and “helping to understand the meaning of the listening material”.

(2) Does performing shadowing help with listening comprehension and listening memory skills?

S1	Yes, I am more able to keep up with the speed and understand the content of the original recording after training, and remember more for subsequent questions.
S2	Yes. I was able to catch the highlights of the recordings better after practice. My memory skills have improved compared to before.
S3	Yes. I can guess what I didn't understand through the experience of shadowing. For example, some common linking can be heard immediately after many training sessions. But I think listening is a test of reaction ability, which can only be achieved by listening more, not reading more. And for us non-English major students, reading out more is just exercising our sense of language, which shouldn't be of much help to our comprehension and memory skills.
S4	It helps that following along effectively develops a sense of language and a better grasp of the rhythm of listening, and even if a keyword is not heard, it will be amazing to realize the word when following along, which will help in the comprehension of listening to the article.
S5	Yes, as I gradually imitated the tone of voice, I was gradually able to form a memory through spoken pronunciation, clearly remembering what words or phonetic change phenomena certain pronunciations corresponded to.

Most of the students held a favorable attitude and affirmed that shadowing contributed to listening comprehension and short-term memory skills. However, some students' perceptions of shadow following were biased, e.g., S3 thought that shadowing only exercised the sense of language and did not improve comprehension and memory ability. This may be because this questionnaire is not clear enough to specify that the memory ability in the question is the short-term memory for the content of the listening material, namely the ability to recall the relevant information when doing the question. Or it may be related to the insufficient duration, frequency, and means of training, which can be practiced at a later stage by the delayed follow-up method of shadowing. The delayed follow-up method forces students to expand the magnitude of perceived discourse units, develop the ability to capture sense group and grasp sentences as a whole, and thus improve their memory skills (Zhu Hui, 2011). At the same time, students can be encouraged to write down keywords or cue marks when doing shadowing exercises to make it easier to recall the content and key information of the listening material.

(3) Will you actively use the shadowing method to improve your listening and speaking skills in English in the future?

S1	Yes. The shadowing method improved my English listening abilities and improved my accent, which helped a lot with my listening and speaking skills.
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S2	Yes. Shadowing method not only trains listening and speaking but also involves vocabulary and grammar understanding, which can improve the comprehensive ability in English.
S3	Yes. The shadowing is following a foreigner's speech, the same as learning your parents to speak Chinese when you were a child, and it's something you can't avoid when learning a language.
S4	No, not a big fan of this method.
S5	It probably will. It won't be because I'm lazy, it will be because I want to improve my listening skills.

Only 5 students out of 33 questionnaires indicated that they would not adopt this method, while the others clearly indicated that they would continue to use this method in the future. The above representative questionnaire responses show that shadowing is effective for most of them, and the students are very receptive to this training method. And the reason for not adopting the shadowing method is not the defects of the method itself, but the subjective attitude of the students themselves. Therefore, the shadowing training method may be widely used in listening teaching in schools.

(4) Has the shadowing method improved your interest in learning English?

S1	Yes, the desire to practice spoken English is stimulated.
S2	Yes, there is a sense of achievement every time you follow through with an article.

80% of the students indicated that shadowing had improved their interest in learning English, while the others indicated that it was average or not. S1's responses indicated that shadowing not only improved listening skills, but also inspired students to speak English, effectively avoiding the current situation of learning mute English in China, and promoting students' listening and speaking skills and desires. S2 mentioned that "a sense of achievement" could greatly improve students' self-confidence in learning and speaking English well, and stimulate their interest in learning English. For other students who fail to increase their interest in learning English, it may be related to the content, difficulty, and length of the listening materials. Teachers can select suitable and interesting materials according to the students' level, and progress step by step, so that the students can slowly adapt to them before raising the level of difficulty and expanding the coverage of the materials' topics.

(5) Suggestions for future shadowing training activities

S1	1. Teachers can mark the places of linking and reduction in the recorded text to make it easier for students to notice the corresponding positions in advance when they look at it. 2. Teachers can organize the students to try to figure out the pauses and division in long sentences on their own first so that students can mark the rising and falling tones, and then listen to the audio at the end.
S2	It is recommended that the choice of listening materials be broadened so that each individual is free to choose topics of interest to him or her, and that the amount of training be matched to the differences in each individual's base.

S3	Sometimes the articles are long and difficult, so it is recommended to follow along in sections.
S4	It is suggested that for longer listening texts it is best to read them in halves because it is tiring to repeat a lengthy article.

Because the practice at this stage is mainly to cope with the students' first CET-4, the exercise materials are all derived from the previous years' CET-4 listening questions, and the materials are relatively single. In the future, teachers can adopt the students' suggestions to further improve the effect of training. Firstly, join the pre-practice stage. Before shadow reading, students first try to figure out the pronunciation variations and intonation in the material by themselves and compare the difference between themselves and the original recording, which will make the practice more profound and avoid similar problems in the future. Secondly, enrich the themes of the listening materials. Materials can be selected according to students' interests or society's heated issues, etc. to improve students' enthusiasm of English learning as well as their knowledge of English-speaking countries' cultures. Thirdly, the difficulty of listening materials should be incremental. Adjust the difficulty according to the students' ability, slightly higher than the students' current level, to let every student keep up the pace and improve steadily. Fourthly, control the length of the material. Excessively long materials are recommended to be carried out in segments, not only to ensure the training effect but also to avoid boredom of the students. At the same time, some students propose to dub the work. This method can be combined with shadowing, like dubbing the work after the shadowing training, which not only examines the training effect of shadowing but also maintains the students' enthusiasm for English.

### 3.2 Data Analysis Based on Students' Pre- and Post-test Scores

The study used SPSS 27.0 software to analyze the listening scores of the same group of objects before and after the shadowing training, therefore, a Paired-Samples T-test was used to verify the significance of the difference in the scores of the two groups. Since the total scores of the two tests were not the same, the study converted the students' first test scores (with a total score of 25) in equal proportions to a total score of 35 as the pre-test scores. The second test score (total score of 35) was used as the post-test score. The results of the Paired-Samples Statistics (Table 1) showed that the mean pre-test score of the students was 19.430 before they received the shadowing training, and 22.576 after they received the shadowing training, which indicates that the students' listening level improved after the training.

**Table 1. Paired-Samples Statistics**

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	pre-test score	19.430	33	4.1672	.7254
	post-test score	22.576	33	4.9055	.8539

The results of the Paired Sample Test (Table 2) show that the difference between the means of the pre- and post-test scores is -3.1455, the standard deviation of the difference is 5.2013, and the mean standard error of the difference is 0.9054. The lower and upper 95% confidence intervals of the difference are -4.9897 and -1.3012 respectively, which do not contain 0, indicating that there is a significant difference between the pre- and post-test scores. T-value is -3.474, the degree of freedom is 32, and the significance probability of two-tailed t-test is 0.001, which is much less than 0.05, also indicating that there is a significant difference between the pre- and post-test scores.

**Table 2. Paired Samples Test**

		Paired Differences					t	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	S. D. deviation	S. E. Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					lower	Upper			
Pair 1	Pre-test results - Post-test results	-3.1455	5.2013	.9054	-4.9897	-1.3012	-3.474	32	.001

In summary, based on the results of the Paired Samples T Test, it can be concluded that the shadowing training method had a significant positive impact on the students' listening skills and that the students' listening level improved after shadowing training, with an average specific improvement of 3.1455 points. This difference is statistically significant as the significance is less than 0,05 indicating that the results are unlikely to be due to random variation.

#### 4. Conclusions and Insights

Previous studies have mostly focused on the features and advantages of the shadowing training method and seldom explored the psychology of students' perceptions of this method from their perspectives. However, students' affective perceptions of a learning task affect their uptake and processing of knowledge. Thus, this study explored students' affective experiences, cognitive processes, and perceptions after shadowing from their perspectives. Also, the results of the study verified the effectiveness of shadowing in improving listening skills. Students generally believe that shadowing training can enhance their listening and speaking ability, increase their mastery of listening details, and further stimulate their interest in English learning. Therefore, shadowing can not only be widely used in interpreting practice but also actively promoted in English listening teaching. In the actual teaching process, teachers should strictly control the breadth, difficulty, and length of the listening materials and adopt progressive teaching methods to steadily improve students' English listening levels and avoid students' negative emotions such as fear and boredom, to ensure the effect of listening teaching.

However, the limitations of this study are that the group of research objects was small, only one natural class was trained in shadowing, and the training materials were limited to CET-4 listening questions. Future research could expand the object group, conduct long-term controlled experiments, and enrich the subject range of the shadow reading materials to further deepen and expand the results of this study to make it more representative and reliable.

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