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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# USING THE SHADOWING TECHNIQUE TO IMPROVE ECUADORIAN ENGLISH LEARNERS' SPEAKING INTELLIGIBILITY

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### ABSTRACT

This research article examined the effects of intensive guided use of the technique known as shadowing to improve overall English pronunciation, intonation, word stress, and sentence stress in the EFL classroom. The research participants were 20 level A1 students from an Ecuadorian university. Qualitative and quantitative data were collected and analyzed utilizing an exploratory sequential mixed methods research design. Qualitative data were gathered through structured interviews. Quantitative data were collected analyzing videotapes recorded by the chosen sample. Both data collection methods were intended to investigate the pronunciation, intonation, word stress, and sentence stress of the respective participants. The findings demonstrated that intensive guided use of English shadowing is an effective technique that can be utilized to help EFL learners improve their overall speaking intelligibility in terms of pronunciation and sentence stress. As far as pedagogical implications is concerned, this study suggests that incorporating the use of the shadowing technique under instructors' guidance may be beneficial to English learners to boost their spoken English skills.

## INTRODUCTION

One of the most important skills in spoken language is intelligibility. Some researchers agreed that to effectively communicate in spoken English, a clear pronunciation is vital (Akram, 2010; Dávila, 2013, 2018; Derwing and Munro, 2009; Jenkins, 2004; Smith, 2011; Yassin, 2008). Being an intelligible English user, of course, means possessing a good command of intonation, rhythm, word stress, and sentences stress; therefore, attention has to be given to the instruction of these language features in the EFL classroom (Celce-Murcia *et al.*, 2010; Lightbown and Spada, 2006; Pickering, 2004; Wennerstorm, 2004). In Ecuador, where this study took place, the teaching of the English language has been incorporated in all education systems, namely, elementary school, high school, and university. Ecuadorian students receive at least five years of English instruction by the time they enter university, time in which, according to the Ecuadorian Ministry of Education, students should reach a level B1 of English proficiency based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Language, CEFR (Council of Europe, 2011).

However, in reality, when Ecuadorian students enter university, most of them face difficulties to communicate in English. That was the case of the research participants in this study. That is when they entered the target university, they were required to take a level A1 English course. At the beginning of the course,

a diagnostic test was administered and the results showed that the participants had a lot of challenges with their speaking skills. Some of the speaking difficulties they had were related to pronunciation, intonation, and stress, which in turn hindered their English communication. According to Pickering (2004) and Wennerstorm (2004), focusing English instruction on language elements such as pronunciation, intonation, and stress can help learners become more intelligible. As for acquiring intelligible English pronunciation, one of the techniques used, according to the existing research, is shadowing (Luo, Yamauchi and Minematsu, 2010; Hsieh, Dong, and Wang, 2013). Consequently, the purpose of this study was to examine whether or not intensive guided English shadowing allowed the target EFL learners improve their overall pronunciation, intonation, word stress, and sentence stress in English. The next section presents the methods used to conduct this study.

## METHODS

**Research Context:** This research study was carried out at a public university in Ecuador during the 2018 spring semester. This research site was chosen purposefully. Purposefully chosen research sites allow researchers to collect meaningful data to inform the research problem (Creswell, 2014; Lichtman, 2013). In this Ecuadorian university, all students must reach a level B2+ of English proficiency as described in the CEFR framework for language learning by the end of their fourth

semester. The rationale for this is because after the fourth semester, English is used as a medium of instruction in this university. This means that all coursework and the undergraduate research project that students write for graduation is done in English.

**Research Participants:** A total of 20 freshman EFL students participated in this study. A purposeful sampling strategy (Creswell, 2014; Lichtman, 2013) was used to recruit participants from three level A1 student groups in the English Department at the target university. These students were facing difficulties regarding their pronunciation, intonation, word stress, and sentence stress in English.

**Research Design:** This study was conducted using an exploratory sequential mixed methods research design (Creswell, 2014). This means that qualitative and quantitative data were collected and analyzed to inform the proposed research hypothesis, namely, intensive guided English shadowing contributes to the improvement of overall pronunciation, intonation, word stress, and sentence stress in English. Two instruments were applied to collect data, structured interviews and videotape analysis.

**Structured Interviews:** The structured interviews were composed of speaking prompts to elicit spoken English information using pictures to inform the research hypothesis. These interviews were carried out prior to an intensive guided English shadowing intervention to explore the most common speaking difficulties participants had. These findings informed the creation of the instrument that participants used to create the videos that were analyzed at the end of the 2018 spring semester.

**Videotape Analysis:** Students were videotaped translating spontaneously a list of 35 words, 15 descriptive phrases, 10 set phrases, 10 questions, 20 statements with nouns and pronouns, 10 listing statements, and 10 clauses into English. The words, phrases, and sentences were given orally in Spanish one by one. The purpose was to measure their English pronunciation, intonation, word stress, and sentence stress. This video analysis was conducted at the end of the 2018 spring semester. Findings of this study are analyzed and discussed in the next section.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

**Results and discussion of the structured interviews:** Interview findings revealed participants' English speaking indelicacy was hindered by language difficulties such as overall pronunciation, intonation, word stress, and sentence stress. These language issues were observed in all twenty research participants. The following participants' utterances are some instances of those speaking problems. Syllables and words that were stressed are indicated in uppercase letters.

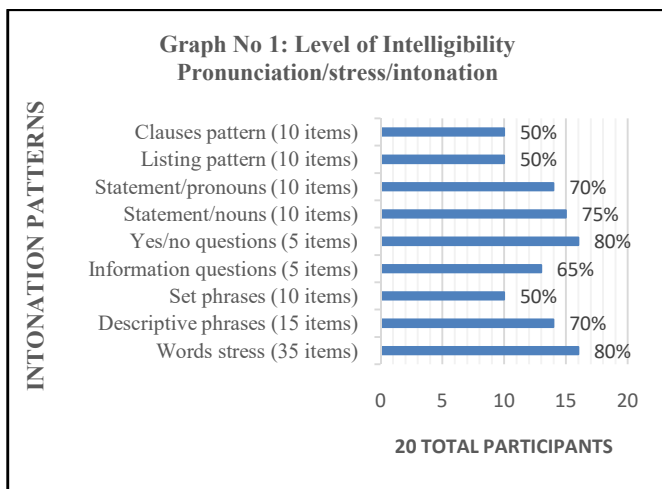
- Car (voiced sounds pronounced as a voiceless sound)
- PermaNENTly
- BEcause
- EnGIneer
- SuPERvise
- PermaNENTly
- IT'S VERY BIG.
- A BABY BOTTLE
- CARMEN SPEAKS FRENCH.
- SHE LIKES IT.
- IS SHE HUNGRY?

- THEY HAVE BREAD, MEAT, RICE, MILK, AND POTATOES.

As can be seen in the participants' speaking utterances above, even though they spent over five years studying English at the elementary and high school level prior to entering university, their speaking English skills were not that developed yet. During the interviews, the participants were asked why they had that many problems with their speaking skills. They said that it was because at the high school level their teachers were not fluent English speakers. As a result, they used Spanish to teach English. Additionally, other reasons mentioned were, for example, that English was taught only one or twice a week, classes were grammar focused (filling out worksheets), that there were too many students per class, lack of learning materials, and lack of motivation to learn English. All these reasons mentioned by the participants justified why they were placed in an A1 level course at the target university. Based on the interview findings, the instructor of the target A1 level English course, assisted by the researchers, created a pedagogical intervention study plan using the shadowing technique, which according to existing research has been used in EFL classrooms to help students improve their English speaking skills (Luo, Yamauchi and Minematsu, 2010; Hsieh, Dong, and Wang, 2013). This pedagogical intervention was intended to examine the hypothesis of this study, namely, intensive guided English shadowing contributes to the improvement of overall pronunciation, intonation, word stress, and sentence stress in English. This independent study plan intervention lasted for the whole 2018 spring semester, five total months. Participants were instructed to practice two hours every day. Every week they were given two listening scripts and a list of 80 words in which the most common intonation patterns of American English pronunciation were present. The shadowing technique created by the researchers was called 'L2RsC2Rs', which meant: 1) L = listening to the target listening script, 2) R1 = repeat the script until you feel comfortable with its pronunciation, 3) R2 = videotape yourself saying the listening script, 4) C = compare your pronunciation with that of the original script, 5) R = record again if you think your pronunciation is not similar to the original one, and 6) R = review your video file with your instructor to receive feedback from him/her.

As for the intonation patterns, these included the most common patterns used in American English pronunciation. The words met twelve intonation patterns as indicated by these nonsense word structures, stressed syllables are indicated with uppercase letters: 1) LA (ended in a voiceless sounds), 2) LAaa (ended in a voiced sounds), 3) la LA, 4) LA la, 5) la la LA, 6) la LA la, 7) LA la la, 8) la la LA la, 9) LA la la la, 10) la la LA la la, 11) la la la LA la, and 12) la la la la LA la. With respect to phrases, there were included set phrases as in 'It's an ENGLISH teacher', a person who teaches English; and descriptive phrases like in 'It's an English TEACHER', someone who is from England. Regarding sentences, these included the six most used intonation patterns, namely, statement intonation with nouns like in 'COWS drink WATER', statement intonation with pronouns as in 'They DRINK it', clauses intonation pattern as in 'AS we all KNOW, COWS drink WATER', listing intonation pattern as in 'KIDS like TOYS, PHONES, and CANDIES', yes/no questions rising intonation pattern like in 'Do COWS drink WATER? / Are you HUNGRY?' and information question rising and falling intonation pattern as in 'when's the MEETing?'

**Results and discussion of the videotape analysis:** At the end of the 2018 spring semester after an intensive English practice intervention using the shadowing technique, the target participants' English speaking skills were examined using an instrument which included a list of 35 words, 15 descriptive phrases, 10 set phrases, 10 questions, 20 statements with nouns and pronouns, 10 listing statements, and 10 clauses. Findings demonstrated that intensive guided shadowing has a positive effect in level A1 English learners. These results found support in the existing body of research as it was said that focusing students' attention on language elements such as pronunciation, intonation, and sentence stress helps them become more intelligible English speakers (Akram, 2010; Celce-Murcia *et al.*, 2010; Dávila, 2013, 2018; Derwing and Munro 2009; Jenkins, 2004; Lightbown and Spada, 2006; Pickering, 2004; Smith, 2011; Wennerstorm, 2004; Yassin, 2008). The graph below demonstrates the pronunciation improvement gained by the target research participants. Additionally, this graph indicates that even though the English shadowing intervention helped participants improve their speaking skills, it also shows that these types of pedagogical interventions have to be implemented for longer periods of time until the target language features such as intonation and stress are totally mastered. The areas in which participants showed more difficulties were, for example, producing set phrases, 50% of accuracy; and producing the listing and clauses patterns, 50% of accuracy. This might be because those intonation patterns are more complex; therefore, it may require more time and practice to master them.



Finally, findings also revealed three unexpected effects as a result of utilizing the shadowing technique. First, the participants said that they felt more confident speaking English. This makes sense because in many aspects of learning the more you rehearse something, the easier it becomes. Consequently, since they were exposed to practice similar language features two hours a day during a whole semester, they gained more confidence when speaking English. Second, they expressed that their speaking fluency level increased. This fact might be related to the level of self-reliance that the participants developed to use oral English skills due to the frequent use of the shadowing technique. Lastly, it was also found that the level of motivation of participants to continue to improve their English skills augmented. Participants highlighted that as they began to use the shadowing technique more and more during

the spring semester of 2018, they started to talk to each other about their learning experiences; as result, they felt more motivated to do their best to complete the weekly assignment regarding their English shadowing practice.

## Conclusion

This exploratory sequential mixed methods study concluded that intensive guided interventions using the shadowing technique has positive effects on beginning EFL learners. However, these types of English practices might show better results if applied for longer periods of time while learners are in a developmental stage of their English learning process. Future studies could focus on examining the effects of longer interventions as well as examining what other aspects of English speaking are improved using the shadowing technique, for instance, spoken grammar, vocabulary acquisition, and so forth.

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