

The Shadowing Technique as an Effective Tool for Expanding the Active Vocabulary of University Linguistics Students

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Abstract. This article examines the pedagogical potential of the shadowing technique as a means of enlarging the active vocabulary of university students majoring in linguistics. Originating in the field of simultaneous interpreter training, shadowing has increasingly been adopted in general foreign language instruction as an integrative exercise that combines listening, articulation, prosody, and lexical retention. The paper outlines the theoretical foundations of the method, distinguishes its principal types, and proposes a structured procedure for its classroom implementation. Particular attention is paid to the mechanisms by which shadowing transforms passive lexical units into active ones, including subvocal rehearsal, phonological loop engagement, and repeated meaningful exposure in authentic contexts. The article concludes that, when systematically integrated into the curriculum, shadowing constitutes a cognitively efficient and motivationally sustainable technique for vocabulary expansion at the tertiary level.

Keywords: *shadowing technique, active vocabulary, linguistics students, foreign language acquisition, oral reproduction, phonological loop, language pedagogy.*

1. Introduction

Vocabulary acquisition remains one of the central concerns of foreign language pedagogy at the university level. Linguistics students, who are expected not merely to understand but to use a foreign language fluently and accurately in professional communication, face a particular challenge: the gap between their receptive and productive lexicons. While university graduates typically recognize a substantial number of lexical units when reading or listening, a significant

proportion of this inventory remains inactive, rarely surfacing in spontaneous speech. Bridging this gap converting passive knowledge into active use has therefore become a priority in contemporary language teaching methodology.

Among the techniques that have attracted growing scholarly and practical interest in recent decades, shadowing occupies a distinctive position. Originally developed in the 1950s by Lambert and his colleagues as a training device for simultaneous interpreters, the technique has gradually migrated into the general foreign language classroom. Its defining feature is the near-simultaneous oral reproduction of an auditory model: the learner listens to a speaker and, with minimal delay, repeats aloud what is being said. The apparent simplicity of this procedure conceals a complex cognitive architecture involving attention, perception, working memory, articulation, and semantic processing.

The present article aims to substantiate the claim that shadowing constitutes an effective pedagogical instrument for the expansion of active vocabulary among university students of linguistics. The discussion proceeds from the theoretical grounds of the method, through a typology of its variants, to a practical scheme of integration into the curriculum. Throughout, the focus remains on the mechanisms by which shadowing activates lexical units that might otherwise remain dormant in the learner's mental lexicon.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. The Notion of Active Vocabulary

In foreign language methodology a traditional distinction is drawn between active (productive) and passive (receptive) vocabulary. The former comprises those lexical items that a speaker can retrieve and deploy without hesitation in spontaneous oral or written production; the latter includes units that are recognized in input but are not readily available for output. The boundary between the two domains is permeable: under appropriate pedagogical conditions, receptive items can be reclassified as productive, while productive items may lose their availability through disuse.

For students of linguistics, whose future professional activities translation, interpretation, teaching, language analysis presuppose a high degree of verbal fluency, the active vocabulary is of paramount importance. Methodologists generally agree that activation of a lexical unit requires, at minimum, several encounters with the word in meaningful contexts, opportunities for productive use, and the establishment of associative links with phonological, grammatical, and semantic neighbours. Techniques that provide all three conditions simultaneously are therefore of particular methodological value.

2.2. The Origins and Definition of Shadowing

The term shadowing was introduced in psycholinguistic research to describe a task in which subjects repeat auditory input verbatim while it is still being uttered. In the context of language

teaching, the technique has been popularized by Japanese methodologist Yo Tamai and subsequently developed by a number of researchers working on English as a foreign language. Shadowing is defined as an active cognitive-articulatory exercise in which the learner reproduces a target language utterance aloud, following the speaker with a lag ranging from a few syllables to a complete phrase, while preserving the original intonation, rhythm, and tempo.

Crucially, shadowing is not mere imitation. It requires the learner to process incoming speech rapidly enough to reproduce it in real time, which in turn compels deep engagement with the phonological, lexical, and syntactic structure of the input. The technique thus trains not only pronunciation but the entire speech production apparatus, including the retrieval of lexical items from long-term memory under temporal pressure.

2.3. Cognitive Mechanisms Underlying Vocabulary Activation

The effectiveness of shadowing for vocabulary expansion can be explained with reference to several well-established cognitive-linguistic constructs. First, the phonological loop a component of working memory responsible for the short-term storage and rehearsal of verbal material is intensively exercised during shadowing. Each repetition of a lexical unit strengthens its phonological representation, which in turn facilitates subsequent retrieval. Second, the technique engages what researchers call depth of processing: because the learner must articulate the heard word, the item is encoded along multiple dimensions auditory, motor, and semantic rather than through a single channel.

Third, shadowing capitalizes on the principle of contextualized encounter. Unlike the memorization of word lists, in which lexical items are decontextualized, shadowing embeds each word in its natural syntactic and discourse environment. This contributes to the formation of richer semantic networks and promotes collocational competence. Finally, the technique reduces the affective filter: because the learner is constrained by the pace of the model and has no time to hesitate or self-correct, the habitual inhibitions that accompany spontaneous production are temporarily suspended, allowing the activation of lexical items that otherwise remain blocked.

3. Types of Shadowing

Methodologists commonly distinguish several variants of shadowing, each with its own pedagogical function. The choice of variant depends on the proficiency level of the students, the specific learning objective, and the nature of the auditory material. The principal types include the following:

- Complete shadowing (full shadowing). The learner reproduces every word of the input, maintaining the closest possible temporal proximity to the speaker. This variant develops phonological accuracy and articulatory fluency and is particularly

useful for internalizing high-frequency lexical units and their collocational patterns.

- Selective shadowing (slash shadowing). The learner reproduces only certain elements of the input for example, content words, terminological units, or target lexical items announced in advance. This variant trains lexical attention and is effective for focused vocabulary expansion within a thematic area.
- Content shadowing (interactive or summary shadowing). The learner reproduces the meaning of the utterance rather than its exact wording, often paraphrasing or reformulating. This variant develops lexical flexibility and synonymic competence, encouraging the active use of alternative expressions.
- Prosody shadowing. The learner concentrates on reproducing the intonation, stress, and rhythm of the original while attending less strictly to individual words. Although its primary aim is suprasegmental, this variant also contributes to the memorization of fixed expressions and chunks.
- Silent or mumble shadowing. A preparatory variant in which the learner articulates the input quietly or subvocally. It serves as a bridge between passive listening and full oral reproduction and is recommended for learners encountering the technique for the first time.

For university students of linguistics, a combination of complete and selective shadowing is generally most productive. The former ensures comprehensive exposure to the lexical inventory of the text, while the latter allows the instructor to direct the learners' attention to specific items targeted for activation in a given lesson.

4. Methodological Principles and Procedure

4.1. Selection of Material

The success of shadowing-based vocabulary work depends in large measure on the judicious selection of auditory material. For university students of linguistics, the following criteria should be observed. The recording must be authentic or near-authentic, spoken at natural pace by a competent speaker of the target language. It should contain a lexical density appropriate to the students' level generally two to four new or semi-familiar items per hundred words so as to provide activation opportunities without overwhelming working memory. The thematic content ought to correspond to the students' academic and professional interests, including lectures, interviews, podcasts, TED-style talks, and excerpts from audiobooks. Finally, a printed transcript should be available, since post-shadowing analytic work with the text is indispensable for consolidation.

4.2. A Recommended Procedure

A systematic approach to shadowing at the tertiary level may be organized into five stages. In the first, preparatory stage, the instructor introduces the thematic context, presents a pre-

selected set of target lexical items, and elicits initial associations. The second stage involves a first listening without any oral reproduction, the aim being global comprehension. During the third stage the students engage in silent or mumble shadowing, articulating the text quietly while following the rhythm of the speaker; this reduces anxiety and allows the phonological patterns to settle. The fourth stage is full shadowing, in which students reproduce the text aloud, ideally several times, each repetition yielding greater fluency and accuracy. The fifth and final stage is devoted to post-shadowing activities: the transcript is examined, target items are discussed, synonyms and collocations are elicited, and the students engage in productive exercises — retelling, role-play, or discussion, designed to transfer the newly activated lexicon into free speech.

4.3. Frequency and Duration

Empirical observations and classroom practice suggest that shadowing yields its best results when practiced regularly in relatively short sessions. A schedule of fifteen to twenty-five minutes of shadowing per class, three to four times per week, produces a noticeable expansion of active vocabulary over the course of an academic semester. Longer, less frequent sessions tend to be less effective, partly because of articulatory fatigue and partly because vocabulary activation depends on spaced, repeated encounters rather than on isolated intensive bursts.

5. Benefits and Limitations

The advantages of shadowing for vocabulary activation are substantial. The technique integrates several skills simultaneously, maximizing the pedagogical return on class time. It provides repeated meaningful exposure to target items in authentic contexts, strengthens phonological representations, and develops the automatization of retrieval under temporal pressure. In addition, shadowing has a beneficial effect on pronunciation, intonation, and overall fluency, qualities that are indispensable to future linguists. The technique is also intrinsically motivating for many learners, since progress is quickly perceptible and the exercises can be conducted autonomously outside the classroom with minimal technical resources.

At the same time, the method has certain limitations that a conscientious instructor should acknowledge. Shadowing places a considerable cognitive load on the learner and may initially be frustrating, particularly for students with lower listening proficiency. Without careful material selection and appropriate scaffolding, students may fall into mechanical repetition devoid of comprehension, in which case the technique loses its vocabulary-activating potential. Moreover, shadowing develops primarily the oral channel; the activation of vocabulary in writing requires complementary exercises. These limitations are not arguments against the technique but rather indications of the conditions under which it operates most effectively.

6. Practical Implementation in the Linguistics Curriculum

In the curriculum of a university department of linguistics, shadowing may be integrated into several courses. In practical phonetics, it serves primarily as a pronunciation exercise, yet even here the attentive instructor can direct the students' attention to the lexical patterning of the recorded speech. In courses devoted to oral practice, shadowing becomes a central technique for activating thematic vocabulary before discussion and role-play. In specialized courses on professional communication, the method is particularly well suited to the assimilation of terminology: technical, legal, diplomatic, or academic lexicon is internalized far more efficiently through repeated oral reproduction than through memorization alone.

Teacher-led shadowing sessions should, wherever possible, be supplemented by regular independent practice. Students may be assigned short podcasts, fragments of academic lectures, or television interviews, together with transcripts and lists of target items, and asked to perform complete and selective shadowing several times, recording their own voice for subsequent comparison with the model. The development of metacognitive awareness — the ability of students to monitor their own progress, identify persistent errors, and adjust their practice accordingly should be treated as an explicit goal of instruction. Over time, such autonomous practice fosters not only lexical expansion but also learner autonomy, a key competence for philologists and future language professionals.

7. Conclusion

The shadowing technique, despite its apparent simplicity, constitutes a sophisticated pedagogical instrument whose potential for expanding the active vocabulary of university linguistics students is considerable. Its effectiveness rests on a convergence of cognitive factors: intensive engagement of the phonological loop, deep multimodal encoding, contextualized encounter with lexical units, and the reduction of the affective filter through temporal constraint. When integrated systematically into the curriculum, accompanied by judicious material selection, a graduated procedure, and supplementary productive activities, shadowing enables the conversion of receptive vocabulary into productive use in a manner that few other techniques can match.

For linguistics students, in whom the quality of oral expression is a defining professional characteristic, the regular practice of shadowing offers both immediate benefits improved fluency, pronunciation, and lexical availability and long-term advantages in the form of enhanced learner autonomy and metacognitive awareness. Further pedagogical research should investigate the optimal combinations of shadowing variants for different proficiency levels and specializations within linguistics, as well as the potential of digital tools for making such practice even more accessible and responsive to individual learner profiles. Nevertheless, the evidence accumulated thus far justifies the inclusion of shadowing among the core techniques of contemporary foreign language instruction at the tertiary level.

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