

## SHADOWING

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**Abstract:** Shadowing is the right method to use when you want to observe an individual and document observations in “as it was happening” format. This method is devoid of probing and you would use this when you don’t want to come in the way of the participant and his natural behaviour.

Shadowing leads to collection of information which further should be investigated and synthesized. Do not use this method when your objective is validation.

**Key words:** shadowing, speech, learner, repeat, pronunciation, repeat, skills

Shadowing is an advanced language learning technique, which can be used by learners independently to improve their intonation and pronunciation.

It’s quite a simple concept - you listen to a model (i.e. a video or audio of someone speaking) and you repeat what they say in real time. Note that this is different from the listen-pause-repeat of yesteryear! The idea is that you repeat, word for word, sound for sound, what you hear, with as little delay as possible.

While the concept is easy, the practice is cognitively quite challenging. It’s the kind of activity that conference interpreters use to hone their skills. When employed regularly, as a part of a broader learning programme, it can be very beneficial and something your students can practise anywhere, anytime.

In this post, I’ll go into more detail about how it works and give you a step by step explanation of how to implement it with your learners.

When you ask someone about the language abilities, typically you don’t say ‘what languages do you understand?’ or ‘what languages can you read?’. What we’re really interested in is speaking! But, oddly enough, this is the one skill that traditional classroom language teaching overlooks.

In fact, speaking isn’t really a single skill; it’s a whole system of processes. There are many different models for speech production, but most acknowledge the following stages: conceptual stage > syntactic stage > lexical stage > phonological stage > phonetic stage

Having to coordinate these processes in fractions of a second is a tall order and even more so when performed in a second language. Speech becomes a tug of war between complexity, accuracy and fluency.

This is where shadowing comes in. It takes away the initial stages of speech production, reducing the cognitive load and allowing learners to focus on the phonological and phonetic stages. When shadowing, we're not concerned by the meaning of the model speech, it's all about replicating the sounds as accurately as possible.

Before introducing this technique to students, you should really have a go yourself. If you don't speak another language, just try doing it with English. Even in your first language, it's tricky to begin with, but you'll get the hang of it.

As I mentioned, shadowing is like a workout for your articulators. In a real conversation, you have to organise your ideas, find the right words and formulate phrases. But by imitating someone else's speech, you can just focus on the sounds of the language.

1) Select a model

- Find a short piece of audio (max. 5 minutes) with just one person speaking.
- It doesn't have to be a native speaker, but they should be proficient and speak clearly.
- A news report or a TED talk is a good place to start (see the example video below).

2) Listen

- Before you start shadowing, listen to the audio at least once to get used to the speaker's accent, rhythm and intonation. It's not a problem if your learners don't understand every word, but if it's too fast or complex, look for an alternative.

3) Practise shadowing

- It can be challenging to begin with, but try to repeat what the speaker says as quickly and as accurately as possible.
- Start by doing 20-30 seconds and if you get stuck, just stop the audio and start again.
- Remind your learners that they're not really concerned with meaning, they're just trying to mimic the speaker's voice.

4) Record it

- Once they've practised and they feel more confident, they can try recording themselves.
- Get them to listen to the audio through headphones and record their voice using a computer or smartphone.

5) Listen back

- Listen back to the recordings and compare their speech to the original audio. This can be done individually or as a class.
- Be sensitive to the fact that people generally don't like to hear the sound of their own voices.

**Reference:**

1. <https://www.freed.com/articles/803/step-by-step-guide-to-the-shadowing-technique>