**Shadowing English suprasegmentals for developing EFL learners' listening comprehension and speech intelligibility**

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**Abstract**

The study reports on a group of EFL learners studying listening and speaking intensive course at Qassim University, KSA. The study reports on engaging the sample of the study in awareness-raising and practicing suprasegmentals of the English language. For achieving the objectives of the study and raising the participants’ self-perceptions and efficacy in listening comprehension, and speech intelligibility a shadowing technique was implemented. The shadowing cycle is a comprehensive one built upon cognitive and technical norms. Results of the study showed a systematic pattern of participants and endorsement for native speakers, improvement in their perceptions of suprasegmentals, and listening comprehension as well. Furthermore, results revealed the participants’ familiarity with suprasegmentals and their ability to implement them in their oracy.

**Keywords:** segmentals, suprasegmentals, shadowing technique, listening comprehension, speech intelligibility

**1. Introduction**

EFL learners have common troubles while listening to utterances of English native speakers. Thus, EFL learners are no longer able to seize vocabulary successfully while listening to English natives, and consequently, this results in listening comprehension problems and conversation failure. Yang, Lin, and Chung (2009) declare that from 40% to 50% of human verbal exchange is acquired by listening, consequently listening is an essential skill that EFL students want to broaden first when learning English as a foreign language.

The researcher realized that many EFL students enrolling in listening and speaking courses at Qassim University, KSA have listening comprehension obstacles. Synchronizing the audio scripts with the printed ones, the researcher realized that students know most of the essential terminologies needed for listening comprehension. Students revealed that their problem is with native speakers’ pace and reduced forms (suprasegmentals). Consequently, the researcher proposed teaching English language suprasegmentals through a proposed shadowing cycle.

Studies related to the teaching of English pronunciation as a second or a foreign language have made obvious the importance of suprasegmental functions (i.e., stress, rhythm, and intonation) in the comprehension and the production of the language (Munro and Derwing 1995, Anderson-Hsieh et al 1992, Anderson 1993). Moreover, it has also been asserted pedagogically (Munro and Derwing, 1995) that speakers who had training on suprasegmentals could seemingly switch their mastering to a spontaneous production more successfully than those who obtained training with only segmentals (i.e., vowels and consonants). Also, Wang (2020) stressed the boundary between segmentals and suprasegmentals for achieving intelligibility. Moreover, Coates (2020) realized English non-native Koreans are unable to produce the same emotional effects of 50 words as native English speakers because they are unable to use suprasegments.

However, the teaching of English suprasegmentals is not a priority in most EFL packages or in commercial materials for training; there's, usually more emphasis positioned on segmental aspects of the language. Then, when EFL listen to English native speakers they encounter difficulties following the utterances and getting the meaning of them. Moreover, EFL learners speak with the segmental feature and produce distracted isolated English utterances.

**1.2. Statement of the problem**

The teaching and the training concern of EFL courses are positioned on the segmental forms of the English language. Consequently, EFL learners face problems in listening to suprasegmentals. EFL learners face varied problems related to rhythm, intonation, and stress. Suprasegmentals lead to poor listening comprehension among EFL learners and the inability to maintain and use suprasegmentals in their oral communication and the poor fragmented oral production of the English language.

**1.3. Rationale**

There are two main reasons for shadowing English language suprasegmentals among EFL learners.

First: the researcher noted a large proportion of intensive course students at Qassim University, KSA have great difficulties in answering listening comprehension questions and they get low grades as well.

Second: There is suprasegmental deviance rather than segmental deviance among EFL learners. ELT experts agreed that suprasegmentals are more critical for intelligibility than segmentals (Dickerson, 1989, Wong, 1987 and Gilbert, 1987). Improving the overwhelming features of stress, rhythm, and intonation provides great chances for listening comprehension and speech intelligibility rather than segmentals.

**2. Literature Review**

**Segmentals and suprasegmentals**

Florez (1998, p.4) defines segmentals as “the primary stock of idiosyncratic sounds and the manner that they integrate for composing a spoken language”. She adds that the instruction of pronunciation has regularly focused on mastering segmentals through discriminating and the producing target sounds of the target language through drills. Suprasegmentals exceed the extent of separate sound production, extend throughout segmentals, and are often conducted directly in an unconscious way by native speakers (Florez, 1998). Hall (1997) admits that we can't ignore the importance of phonemic discrimination, and continues to state that suprasegmentals such as stress, rhythm, and intonation are if anything, greater important than segmentals. Wong (1993) states that the most relevant features of pronunciation as “rhythm, intonation, and stress” play a greater part in English communication than the individual pronunciation sounds. Thus, Suprasegmentals as; rhythm, intonation, and stress have a major role in the success of verbal communication. The listener has to acquire the varied suprasegmental features of the conversation.

Stress is the length, loudness, and pitch of syllables within a single word (e.g. **Ca**∙na∙da). Rhythm refers to the more prominent syllables in an utterance for emphasizing meaning or intent (e.g., I’m **co**∙ming on **Mon**∙day.). Intonation refers to the rising and falling pitch patterns in utterances. For instance, I’m traveling on Monday would normally have a rise-fall pitch on Monday while are you traveling on Monday could have a rising pitch on Monday. Although suprasegmentals are important, many language learners appear to have problems with them (Foote, Holtby, & Derwing, 2011). Hahn, 2004 adds that such problems can lead to communication difficulties.

Teaching language; specifically, pronunciation during the past was mainly a linguistic work that considers sounds of language as discrete items called “phonemes” McCarthy (1991). Fraser (2000, p. 11) mentions that segmentals and suprasegmentals can’t be separated during instruction since it isn't always the way to go whilst considering teaching pronunciation in a communicative technique. Such problems with teaching suprasegmentals led the researcher to undertake a “shadowing approach” in the EFL listening classroom.

**Shadowing Technique**

Shadowing was originally developed as an interpreting training technique in Europe and has gained much interest among language educators in improving the speaking and listening competence of learners as ‘shadowing’ requires competence in both speaking and listening (Hamada, 2016). Tamai (1997, p. 20) defined shadowing as a performance or listening task in which the learner follows the heard speech and repeats it as exactly while listening with attention to the incoming information.

The researcher proposed a Working Memory shadowing Model (figure 1). Based on this model, ‘shadowing’ is a high cognitive action rather than a mere automatic memory parroting action. The model is based on four cycles; (1) is mumbling where the students shadow the text in low voice without seeing it, (2) is parallel reading where the students look at the text while shadowing it, (3) is comprehending i.e. studying the text and getting suprasegmentals and (4) reflection which is a further stage for practicing what has been learned.

Figure 1. Shadowing Cycle

**3. Method**

The study is described in this section. The first subsection presents the objectives of the study. Participants and location are described in the second subsection. The third and fourth subsections describe instruments and standardization. The fifth subsection is for the procedure of data collection. Subsection six presents the data analysis method and hypotheses.

**3.1. Objectives of the Study**

The present study tries to fulfill the following objectives:

- Examining EFL learners’ difficulties in listening comprehension.

- Evaluating EFL participants’ listening comprehension of suprasegmentals after managing a shadowing strategy.

**3.2. Participants and location**

The participants of the study were 35 Intensive Course learners at Qassim University, KSA (Uglat Asugour College of Science and Arts). All the participants studied English for nine years before joining the intensive course. The participants received suprasegmentals focused instruction during the fall semester of the academic year 2019/2020.

**3.3. Instruments**

3.3.1. Listening Comprehension test

The researcher developed a listening comprehension test for achieving the purpose of the present study. The test includes varied listening extracts that contain suprasegmentals. After listening to the extracts, participants answer different related comprehension questions.

3.3.2. Shadowing Listening test

Shadowing Listening test provides some English listening extracts. The participants of the study listen to each extract then identify the suprasegmentals and state the full forms of these suprasegmentals. The participants’ responses are evaluated on a three-point scale; zero for not recognizing suprasegmentals, one for just shadowing, and two for shadowing, and stating the full form.

**3.4. Tests validity & Reliability**

To verify the content validity of listening comprehension and shadowing listening tests, the first versions of the tests were submitted to a panel of language instructors and EFL specialists. The jurors were required to give their points of view regarding test grading, items, and the feasibility of the tests.

For checking tests reliability Cronbach's alpha was computed. Cronbach's alpha is 0.87 for the listening comprehension test and is 0.813 for the shadowing test, proposing a relatively high internal consistency of both tests.

**3.5. Procedure of data collection**

The present study lasted for three months. The participants received a pre-test in listening comprehension and shadowing listening. All participants then received suprasegmentals focused instruction for about three months with the proposed shadowing strategy. Finally, the participants sat for post-tests.

**3.6. Hypotheses**

Quantitative analysis is used to test two hypotheses:

1. Participants will comprehend comprehensively the listening extracts when following the shadowing cycle.
2. Participants will produce intelligible speech when following the shadowing cycle.

**4. Results of the study**

4.1. Hypothesis one

Participants will comprehend comprehensively the listening extracts when following the shadowing cycle.

To verify the validity of the first hypothesis a paired-samples t-test was used. Table (1) shows the significance of the difference between the mean scores of the participants in the pre-post listening comprehension test.

Table1 Significance of difference between the mean scores of

the participants in the pre-post listening comprehension test

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Testing | Mean | Std. Deviation | df | t | Sig. |
| Pre-testing | 30.11 | 5.6 | 34 | 9.3 | 0.001 |
| Post-testing | 39.0 |

The data presented in table (2) reveals that "t" value is (9.3) and significant at 0.001, and "df" equals 34. This means that the shadowing cycle is effective in developing EFL learners’ listening comprehension to native speakers of the English language.

4.2. Hypothesis two

Participants will produce intelligible speech when following the shadowing cycle.

To verify the validity of this hypothesis a paired-samples t-test was used. Table (2) shows the significance of the difference between the mean scores of the participants in the pre-post shadowing listening test.

Table2 Significance of difference between the mean scores of

the participants in the pre-post shadowing listening test

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Testing | Mean | Std. Deviation | df | t | Sig. |
| Pre-testing | 16.6 | 2.9 | 34 | 10.059 | 0.001 |
| Post-testing | 21.6 |

Table (2) reveals that "t" value is (10.059) and is significant at 0.001, and "df" equals 34. This means that the shadowing cycle is effective in developing speech intelligibility among EFL learners.

**5. Discussion**

Listening comprehension is a critical skill in language learning i.e. many learners face problems related to it. Thus, EFL researchers paid attention to developing listening comprehension by analyzing the varied listening comprehension problems and proposing teaching strategies. Others manipulated CALL (Computer Assisted Language Learning) and MALL (Mobile Assisted Language Learning) programs for developing listening comprehension among language learners.

Wah (2019) and Sebina and Arua (2017) mention that listening teachers don’t follow clear teaching strategies and they don’t teach listening communicatively. Aryana and Apsari (2018) divided the problems of teaching listening skills that face English teachers into internal ones like preparation methods and activities and external ones that sound from the teaching environment. Alrawashdeh and Al-zayed (2017) mentioned that the low listening problems are related to the teacher’s proficiency, the medium ones related to the teaching environment, and the highest related to teaching aids. Fan (2019) showed the importance of oral corrective feedback in improving listening and speaking skills. Zuhriah (2020) proposed a frontloading strategy that activates the students’ prior knowledge about the topics that will be studied.

Recently EFL researchers have adhered to technology for developing listening comprehension. Islam and Hassan (2020) highlighted the efficacy of MALL in developing English listening comprehension among EFL learners. Khoiriyah (2020) made a review of all Call materials and tools available for teaching listening comprehension. While Mohamed (2018) and Namaziandost and Nasri (2018) investigated the usefulness of using audiobooks and visual aids to help EFL learners to grow and develop their listening comprehension. Fachriza (2020) and Sandag, Gedik, and Toker (2018) revealed that using the audio podcast application is effective media for achieving better results in guessing the meaning of listening. Hassan and Abdel-Kareem (2020) and Pamaji and Setyarini (2020) highlighted the use of websites and the associated applications in teaching listening comprehension.

The present researcher developed a shadowing cycle as a strategy for developing listening comprehension and speech productivity and intelligibility among EFL learners. The shadowing cycle is built on cognitive norms since it manipulates reading scripts while listening. Furthermore, the shadowing cycle uses varied technical aids for presenting and repeating audio scripts. Results of the experimental study showed that participants have improved their listening comprehension as well as participants also learned to maintain the suprasegmentals and to use them in their oral discourses.

Improvement in listening comprehension

The main reason that hindered the sample students to get the meaning of the listening extracts was using suprasegmentals. The samples were unable to get and follow suprasegmentals and their meanings, consequently, they produce wrong answers to related listening comprehension questions. When the participants were trained on managing and following suprasegmentals, they became able to follow the conversations and get the correct meaning.

Speech intelligibility

Following the shadowing cycle led the participants to become familiar with suprasegmentals. Participant students were trained to mimic and follow suprasegmentals. Furthermore, in a further stage in the shadowing cycle, the participants were required to use suprasegmentals orally in the reflection stage. Following the shadowing cycle has improved the participants’ oral speech; the students began to use suprasegmentals in their speech. Results of the shadowing test revealed the samples’ familiarity with suprasegmentals and their ability to use them in their speech.

**6. Conclusion**

EFL intensive course students, studying at the College of Science and Arts in Uglat Asugour, Qassim University, KSA face problems related to listening comprehension and speech intelligibility. The researcher realized that such difficulties and problems are related to language suprasegmentals. The researcher’s proposed shadowing cycle proved efficacy in improving listening comprehension and improving speech intelligibility.

The shadowing cycle is based on working memory. participants in the first phase repeat the speech in low voice without seeing it to get acquainted with speed and rhythm. In the next stage, they repeat the speech while seeing it to correlate what they see to what they listen to. The third stage is related to comprehension, participants get answers to varied comprehension questions. The final cycle is concerned to further practice in varied oral examples to maintain speech intelligibility.

The training course lasted for three months. By the end of the training course, results revealed the participants’ enhancement in listening comprehension and speech intelligibility as well. Participants showed their ability to follow the speed and the rhythm of the speech. Furthermore, participants proved their ability to produce native similar speech. They tended to use suprasegments in their oral communication. Participants’ speech became faster and smoother.

As this study was conducted on a small sample (35) of expatriate EFL Saudi adult learners, a larger sample like a whole institution or university is needed for experimentation. Also, various age groups like secondary stage students, preparatory, and elementary stage pupils require experimentation. Postgraduates and undergraduates will be of interest to test the effectiveness of the shadowing cycle in a comparative study.

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