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Shadowing technique to teach Listening to A1 level EFL students

Técnica Shadowing para enseñar comprensión oral a estudiantes de EFL de nivel A1

Mayra Nataly Campoverde Villavicencio, Juanita Catalina Argudo Serrano

ABSTRACT

Shadowing is a listening technique that develops the bottom-up process (the understanding of the smallest units of the audio input such as individual sounds) of the listening skill by training the learners' ears to recognize phonemes, words, and thus phrases. It is said this is a useful technique for the development of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners' listening skills. Therefore, this study aims to analyze the effect of the shadowing technique on the listening skill of A1-level EFL learners from Luisa de Jesús Cordero High School. An explanatory sequential mixed method design will be carried out by using the listening part of the A2 Key for Schools from Cambridge Language Assessment exam and a close-ended survey to assess the impact of shadowing on the students' listening performance and their perception of shadowing. For this purpose, experimental and control groups were carried out. The study outcomes provide information about how shadowing, as a technique to teach listening, has influenced English learners' listening skill and their perspectives in an Ecuadorian high school setting.

Keywords: Listening skill; shadowing technique; EFL; proficiency level

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RESUMEN

Shadowing es una técnica de escucha que desarrolla la comprensión de las unidades más pequeñas de significado de un audio, como los sonidos individuales (bottom-up skills) al entrenar el oído de los estudiantes para reconocer fonemas, palabras y, por lo tanto, frases. Se considera que esta técnica es útil para el desarrollo de las habilidades auditivas de los estudiantes de inglés como lengua extranjera. Por lo tanto, este estudio tiene como objetivo analizar el efecto de la técnica de shadowing en la habilidad auditiva de los estudiantes de inglés como lengua extranjera de nivel A1 de la Unidad Educativa Luisa de Jesús Cordero. Se llevará a cabo un diseño de método mixto secuencial explicativo utilizando la parte de comprensión auditiva del examen A2 Key for Schools de Cambridge Language Assessment, una encuesta y un grupo focal para evaluar el impacto de la técnica de shadowing en el rendimiento auditivo de los estudiantes y la percepción de este. Para ello, un grupo experimental y otro de control fueron llevados a cabo. Los resultados del estudio pretenden proporcionar información sobre cómo shadowing como una técnica para enseñar a escuchar ha influenciado en la competencia auditiva de los aprendices del idioma inglés, así como sus perspectivas en el contexto de un colegio ecuatoriano.

Palabras clave: destreza de escuchar; técnica de shadowing; EFL; nivel de suficiencia

1. Introducción

The listening skill is the "least researched of all four language skills" (Vandergrift, 2007, p. 291); and according to Walker (2014), it is considered the most difficult skill to be taught. Nonetheless, this receptive skill can be considered a fundamental part of language acquisition since learners need sufficient comprehensible input to produce a language, i.e. listening (Krashen et al, 1984), and thus acquire it. In addition, according to Rost (2011), a student capable of using listening to learn a language is more competent than a student who cannot. Studies that have researched techniques to teach the listening skill in EFL classes have agreed that shadowing can be useful to practice the listening skill in class (Hamada, 2017; Saito et al, 2011; Sumiyoshi & Svetanant, 2017).

Since listening is a vital skill, it is necessary to get to know techniques that focus on teaching listening such as shadowing. In this sense, shadowing is a technique in which the person listens to the speech and repeats it as precisely as possible in a simultaneous way while listening to the rest of the speech (Horiyama, 2012; Tamai, 1997). The action of listening attentively and reproducing the sounds helps second language learners (SLL) be aware of the phonemes that form a word, and therefore, recognize words separately in order to understand chunks, and thus messages.

The listening skill requires people to use both top-down and bottom-up processing (Vandergrift & Goh, 2012). These authors mentioned that in top-down processing, people use the context and their prior knowledge to understand the message whereas in bottom-up processing people segmentate what they hear into meaningful units (from phonemes to words) to interpret the message. It has been suggested that the development of bottom-up skills in learners can assist in better performance in listening competence with lower-proficiency students (Khuziakhmetova & Porcheskub, 2016).

In addition, Hamada (2017) explains the relationship between L1 listening, L2 listening, and shadowing using an analogy. He states that L1 listening is like walking, L2 listening is like sprinting, and shadowing is like exercise. Walking takes a few years to master but eventually, it becomes an automatic ability. Nonetheless, sprinting requires training or practice to do it successfully. To do so, it is necessary to exercise the muscles involved in sprinting, and that is shadowing for listening. It is putting into practice bottom-up skills since EFL learners' context does not give them the opportunity to develop bottom-up skills naturally to become automatic. This phenomenon is experienced by participants of this study since they only have exposure to the target language in the classroom.

Shadowing is a technique that is considered an effective way to develop the learners' "good ear", especially in aspects such as accent, intonation, and global listening skills (Tanaka, 2002 as cited in Wiltshier, 2007). Furthermore, Shimomura (2018) claimed that shadowing is a technique capable of improving the students' phoneme perception skills which control the speed and amount of information they are able to process in their memory.

Different studies have proposed that shadowing makes students work on their bottom-up processing since it provides opportunities for learners to identify the different phonemes and differentiate words (Hamada, 2015). As a result, students need more techniques that make them practice their bottom-up process to help them in the development of their listening skills. For this reason, the current research on the shadowing technique for developing the listening skill could use additional data in a different context from the ones studied so far. This study aims to examine the impact of the use of the shadowing technique on the listening skill of A1 level EFL students at Luisa de Jesús Cordero High School. Data gathering tools will include pre and post-tests to assess students' performance in listening skills as well as close-ended survey to determine the students' perspectives on the use of the shadowing technique in EFL classes. In addition, the line of research of this study is the formation and professional development of EFL teachers whose purpose is to aid in the improvement of learners' communicative and linguistic competence. The questions that guided this study were:

How does the use of the shadowing technique impact the listening skill of A1 level EFL students?

What are the students' perceptions of the use of the shadowing technique for the listening skill in EFL classes?

2. Methodology

Study Design

This study used an explanatory sequential mixed methods design, which according to Creswell (2012), "consists of first, collecting quantitative data, and then collecting qualitative data to help explain or elaborate on the quantitative results" (p. 621). The gathered information was used to examine the impact of using the shadowing technique on the listening skill of A1 level EFL students from Luisa de Jesús Cordero High School. The quantitative method was used to assess the influence of shadowing on participants' listening skills by comparing the results of the pre-test and post-test. Whereas, the qualitative method was used to collect the students' perspectives on the shadowing technique. The perspectives were used to complement the interpretation of the results.

Participants

The selection method of this research was convenience sampling which consists of working participants who are available for the study (Mackey & Gass, 2005). There were approximately 46 female students from Luisa de Jesús Cordero High School. It is an only-female educational center with around 1000 students from kinder garden to third of baccalaureate. It has English as one of the main subjects with 6 hours a week for sublevel superior. The students' ages ranged from around 12-14 years old. The students were divided into two groups according to their class: ninth B and ninth C. One group was the control group and the other was the experimental group. Each group will consist of around 28 students. In addition, it is important to mention that participation is voluntary, and parents' and learners' consents were taken into account.

Instruments

Two instruments were used in this research project: a test instrument and a questionnaire with closed and open-ended questions.

The first instrument is the A2 Key for schools from Cambridge Language Assessment which is a British-English exam for school-age learners. This exam consists of three parts: reading and writing, listening, and speaking. In this research, only the listening part will be taken into account and it has five different activities. The Cambridge Assessment English (2020) describes the activities as follows:

- Part 1 (visual listening): there are five 3-option multiple choice questions in which students have to choose the correct visual according to what they hear.
- Part 2 (listening for gist): it is a gap-filling activity in which learners have to listen to complete the blanks.
- Part 3 (multiple choice questions about a dialogue): there are five 3-option multiple choice questions about a dialogue between two people. Learners have to choose the answer according to the key information.
- Part 4 (multiple choice questions about five short dialogues): There are five short monologues or dialogues and students have to choose the correct answer from 3-option multiple-choice questions.
- Part 5 (matching people's names with the items): it is a matching activity in which students listen to a dialogue between two people and match people's names with the correct item

This instrument was chosen due to the students' proficiency levels in English. The same instrument was taken in the pre-test and post-test.

The second instrument was an open and closed-ended questionnaire for the cross-sectional survey design that collects data about the current opinions, practices, and attitudes of the participants about a topic at a specific time (Creswell, 2012). The questionnaire contained two kinds of items: nominal and ordinal. The gathered data was used to examine the participants' perceptions in the experimental group.

Procedure

This research was carried out in two phases.

Phase 1

The shadowing technique was explained to both groups as a way to motivate them to participate. Then a consent document was given to each student, addressed to their parents, asking for their permission to let their daughters participate voluntarily in the study. After their approval was granted, the A2 Key for Schools from Cambridge Language Assessment as a pre-test was applied to the experimental and control groups to assess the level of their listening skill previous to the experiment. Then, the shadowing technique was applied during classes with only the experimental group while the control group had the activities proposed in their English textbook. The shadowing technique was carried out twice a week for one month and a half. Then a post-test was applied to both groups, using the same instrument as in the pre-test to check the level of the listening skill and compare the impact on the listening skill due to the use of the shadowing technique in class.

Phase 2

A questionnaire was conducted with the participants in the experimental group to collect their impressions on the use of the shadowing technique in class and the changes they perceive in their listening performance. This was applied the next day of the post-test. Twenty of the twenty-two students participated. The questionnaire was developed in Google Forms, and it was validated before its application by the tutor of this research and a third group of students with similar features as the experimental and control group.

Analysis

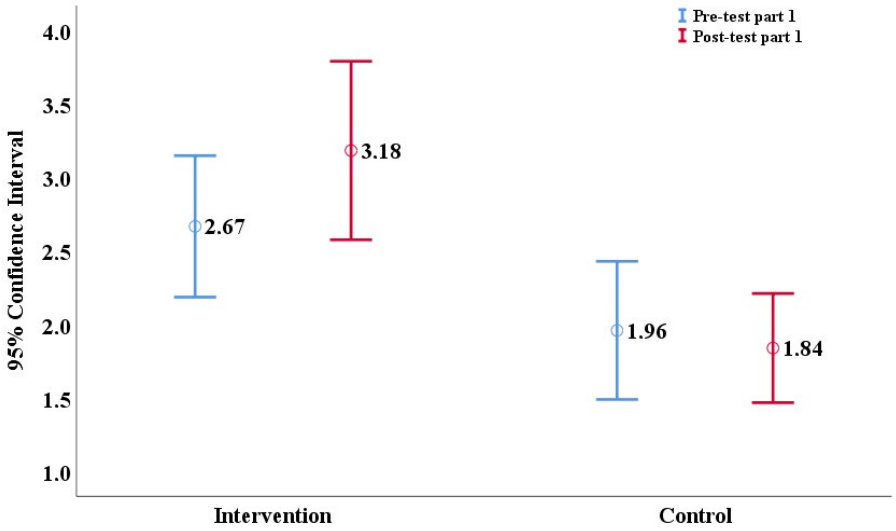
The SPSS 25 (Field, 2018) and JASP 0.017 (Goss-Sampson, 2019) programs were used, considering descriptive elements that allow illustrating the averages, as well as analytical elements that allow comparisons between the results achieved before and after the intervention. Comparisons are made with the student's t-test when normality and homoscedasticity are met, as well as Welch's t-test when only normality is met. The averages of each situation are illustrated, accompanied by 95% error bars that allow visual comparison of significant differences (Cumming & Finch, 2005).

3. Results

The results are presented in two sections. The first compares the scores for each part of the test before and after the intervention, as well as the total test. The second section deals with evaluating the perception of the students who received the intervention.

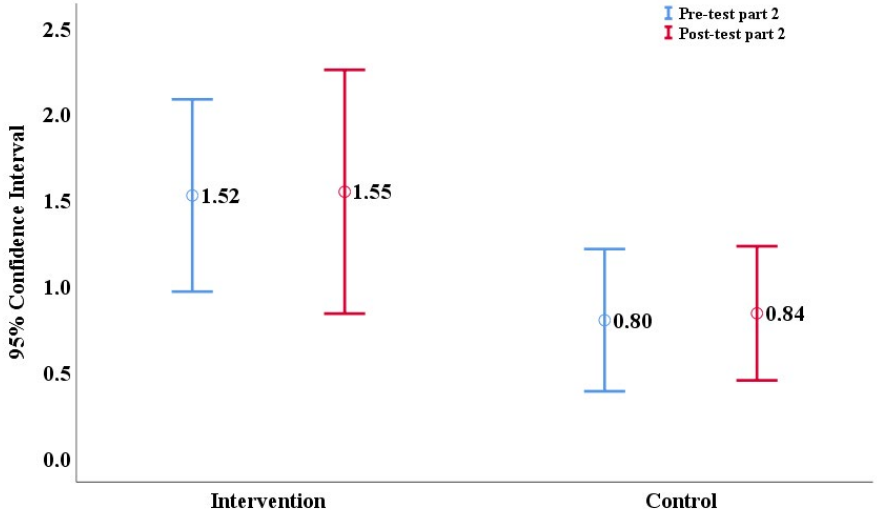
Under the hypothesis that the intervention group with shadowing should increase their score more than the control group in the visual listening test, the results obtained by each group are compared. In this case, the improvement in the experimental group is 0.515 points and in the control group -0.120. A Student's t-test shows that this is a significant difference ($t(45df)=1.833;p=0.037$). Therefore, it is verified that those who were intervened have improved more in the test. The results are illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Average of the pre-test and post-test of test 1: visual listening with error bars at 95%



The second hypothesis also suggests that the experimental group with the shadowing techniques should increase their score more than the control group in the listening for gist test. In this case, the increase in the experimental group is 0.022 points and in the control group 0.040. A Welch's t-test shows that it is a non-significant difference (t(45df)=-0.050;p=0.520). Consequently, it is not verified that those who were intervened have improved more in the test. The results are plotted in Figure 2.

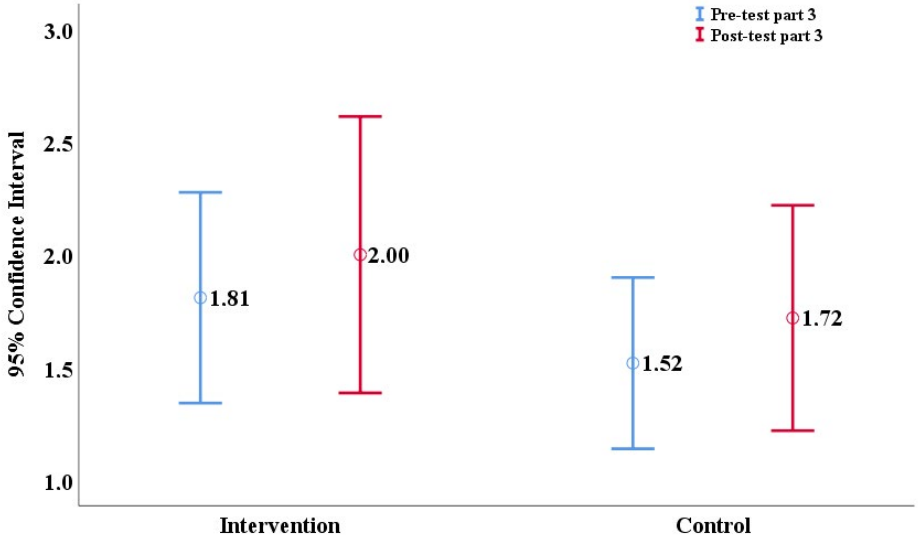
Figure 2. Average of the pre-test and post-test of test 2: listening for gist with error bars at 95%



The third hypothesis also states that the experimental group with shadowing should increase their score more than the control group in the multiple choice questions about a dialogue test. In this case, the increase in the experimental group is 0.190 points and in the control group 0.200. A Student's t-test shows that it is a non-significant difference (t(45df)=-0.023;p=0.509). Conse-

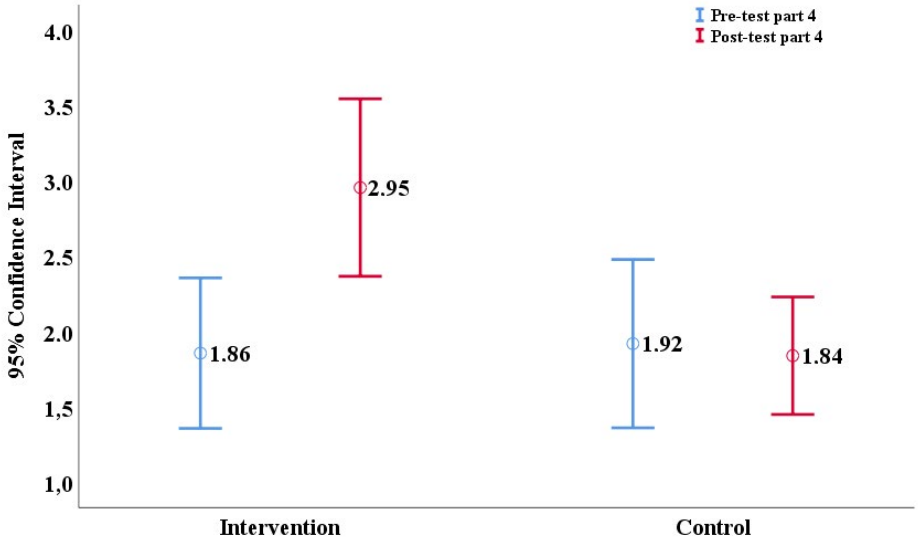
quently, it is not verified that the interventions have obtained a better score than those of the control group. The averages are plotted in Figure 3.

Figure 3. Average of the pre-test and post-test of test 3: multiple choice questions about a dialogue with error bars at 95% confidence



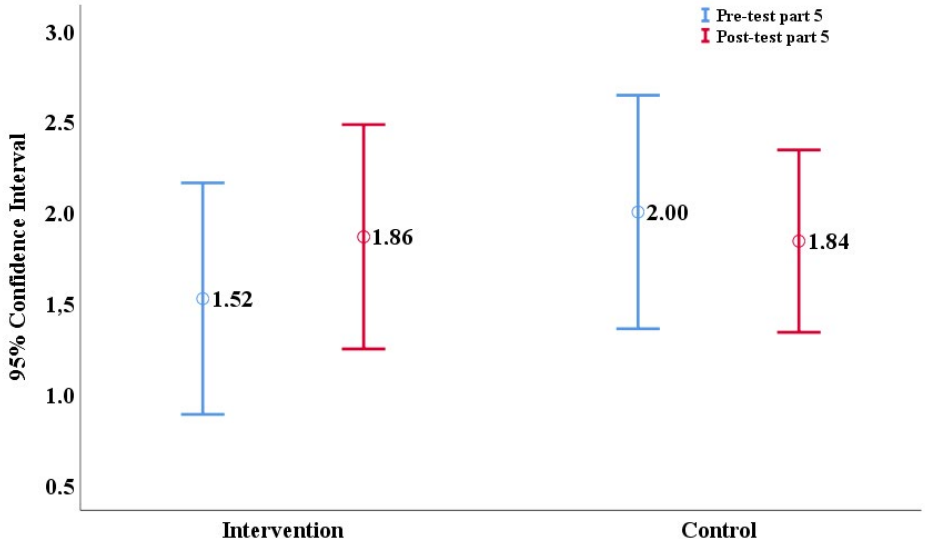
The fourth hypothesis proposes that the experimental group with the shadowing strategies should increase their score more than the control group in the multiple choice questions about the five-shot dialogues test. In this case, the increase in the experimental group is 1,097 points and in the control group -0.080. The Student's t-test shows that it is a highly significant difference (t(-45df)=2.622;p=0.006). Thus, it is verified that the interventions have achieved a better score than those of the control group. The averages are illustrated in figure 4.

Figure 4. Average of the pre-test and post-test of test 4: multiple choice questions about five short dialogues with error bars at 95% confidence



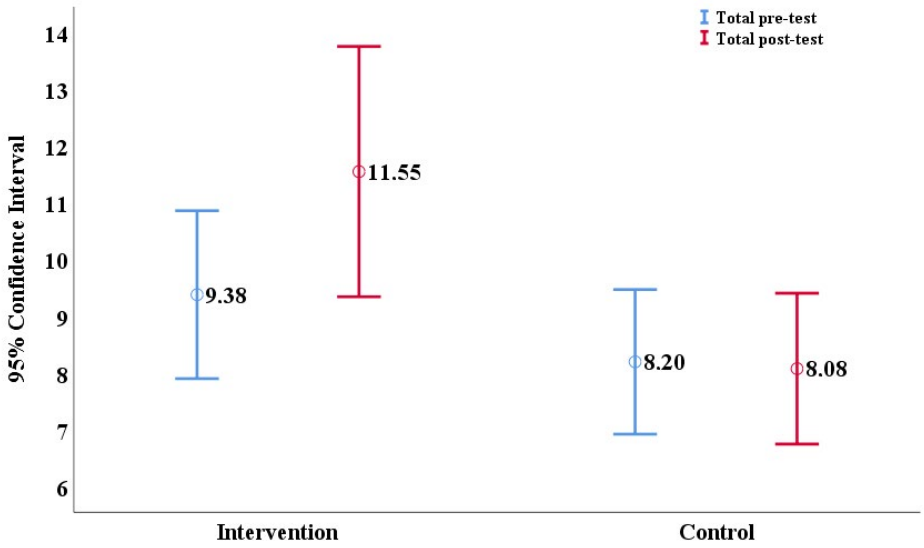
The fifth hypothesis also states that the experimental group with the shadowing techniques should increase their score more than the control group in the matching people's names with the items test. In this case, the increase in the experimental group is 0.340 points and in the control group -0.160. A Student's t-test shows that it is a non-significant difference (t(45df)=1.165;p=0.125). Consequently, it is not verified that the interventions have obtained a better score than those of the control group. The averages are plotted in Figure 5.

Figure 5. Average of the pre-test and post-test of test 5: matching people's names with the items with error bars at 95% confidence



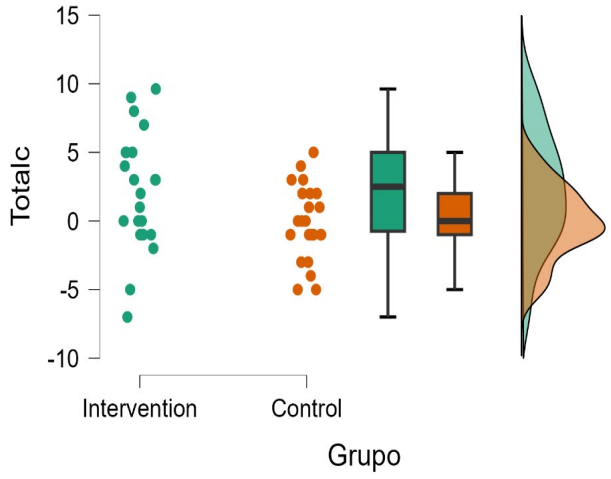
The sixth hypothesis also states that the intervention group with shadowing should increase their score more than the control group. In this case, all five previous 1-5 point tests are added together and a 5-25-point comparison is generated that sums up all the scores. The scores of the results show that the increase in the experimental group is 2.165 points and the control group -0.120. A Welch's t-test shows that it is a significant difference (t(45df)=2.231;p=0.015). Consequently, it is verified that the interventions have achieved a better score than those of the control group. The averages are plotted in Figure 5.

Figure 6. Average of the pre-test and post-test of the total test with error bars at 95% confidence



Finally, by way of illustration, in Figure 7, it is represented the movement suffered in the results of each student after subtracting the value of the post-test minus the pre-test. If there had been no changes, the results would be positioned around 0, but since there have been changes, especially in the experimental group, it is observed that the cloud of points extends upwards, while in the control group, the cloud barely rises. scattered. The same is observed in the box-and-whisker plot. In this sense, it is concluded that the program has been favorable in terms of evidence of results.

Figure 7. Position in point clouds of the positions moved between the control group and the intervention group

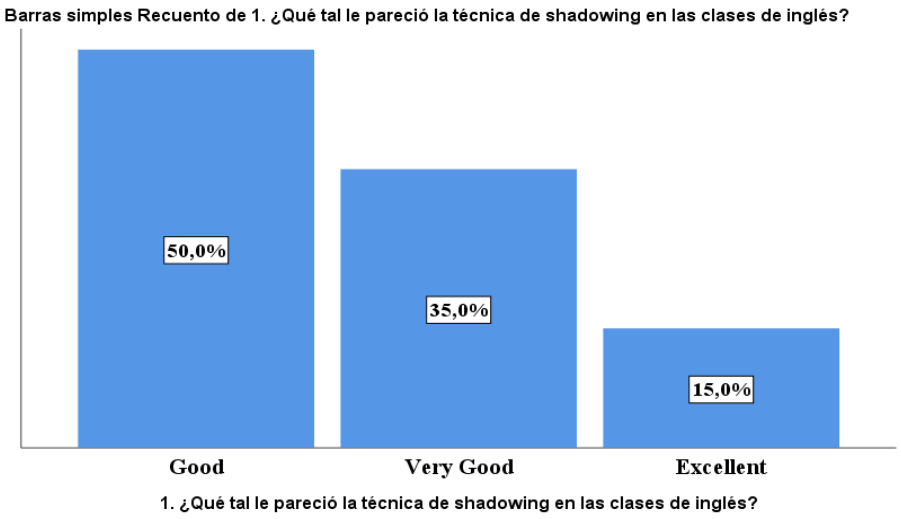


Perception of the intervention in percentages

The students from the experimental group were asked to fill out a nine-question form about the intervention process. Below are the response rates.

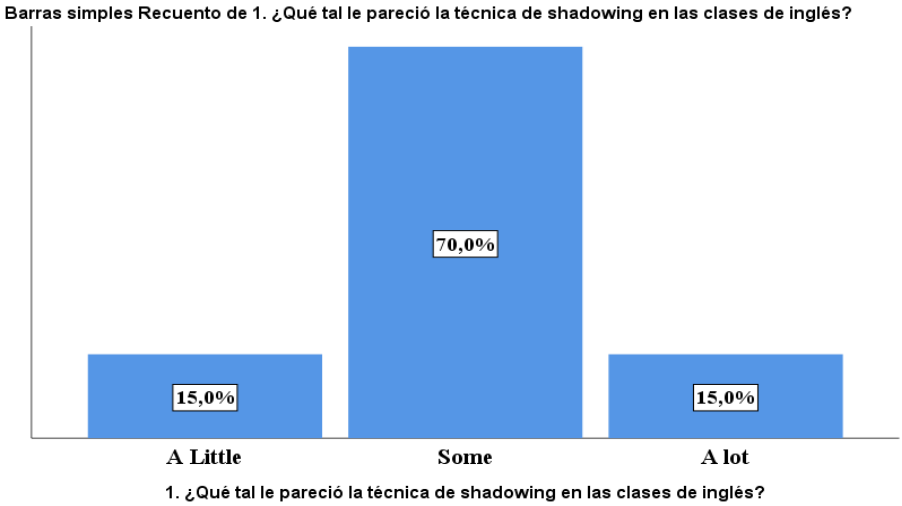
The first question is about the perception of the shadowing technique on a scale of 1-5 points. It shows that half of the students place their answers in an intermediate point that is equivalent to the level of good, 35% considered it very good, and 15% % Excellent. The results are illustrated in Figure 8.

Figure 8. Percentage of responses to question 1. How did you consider the shadowing technique in English classes?



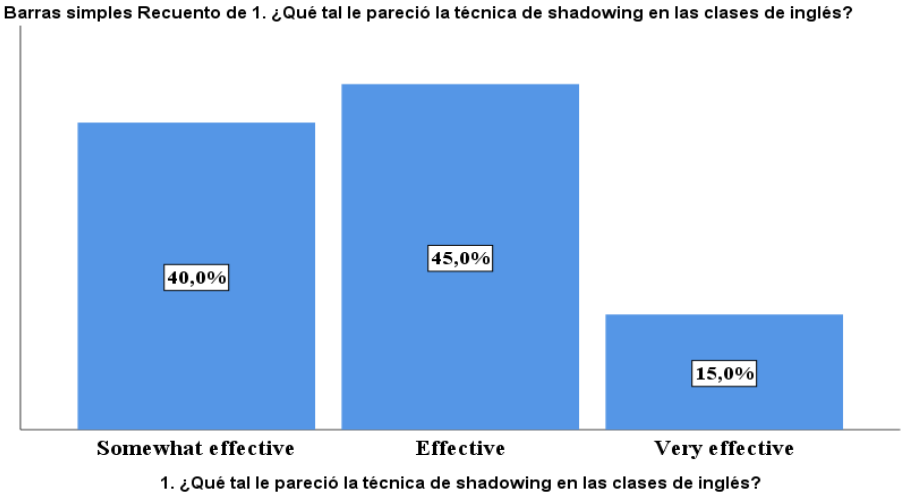
The second question is about the perception of whether their level of listening has improved. Most of the answers are located in the perception of more or less (70%) on a scale of three positions 1-3. These values are illustrated in Figure 9.

Figure 9. Percentage of responses to question 2. Do you consider that your listening skills have improved with the shadowing technique?



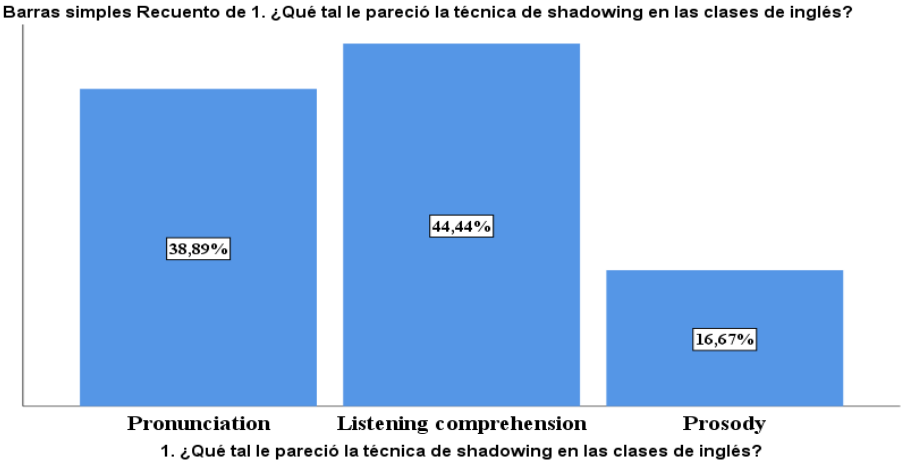
The situation regarding the perception of whether learning is effective for the evaluation, on a scale of 1-4 points, shows that 40% of the students considered it moderately effective and 45% effective. The results can be seen in Figure 10.

Figure 10. Percentage of responses to question 3. Do you consider that the shadowing technique is effective for learning English?



The results of the question on the micro skills that the students developed the most according to their own point of view, in which the students could choose more than one option, show that 38.9% is pronunciation, 44.4% % in reading comprehension and 16.7% in prosody.

Figure 11. Percentage of responses to question 4. What micro-skills do you consider had the greatest influence when using the shadowing technique in your learning English?



Another question that was asked on a scale of 1-3 positions is whether they would like to practice listening with the shadowing technique. 75% of the responses pointed to affirming that they would continue. These results are illustrated in Figure 12.

Figure 12. Percentage of responses to question 5. Would you like to continue practicing your listening skills with the shadowing technique?

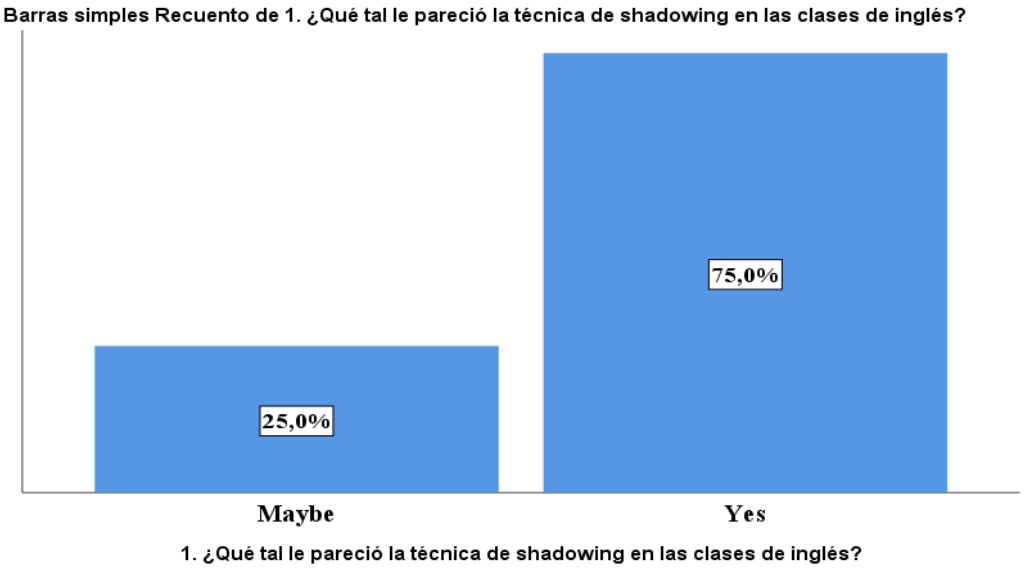
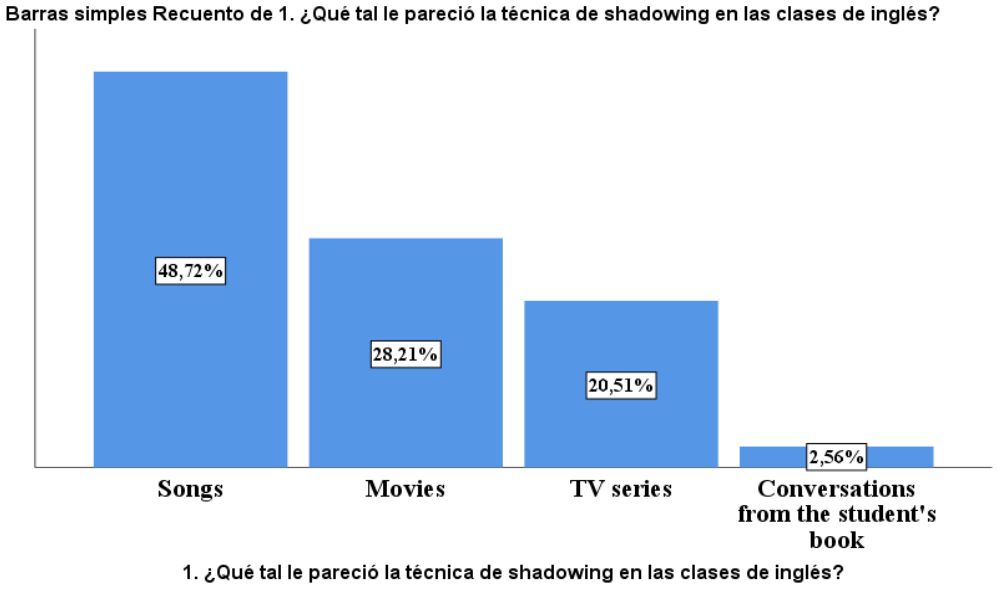


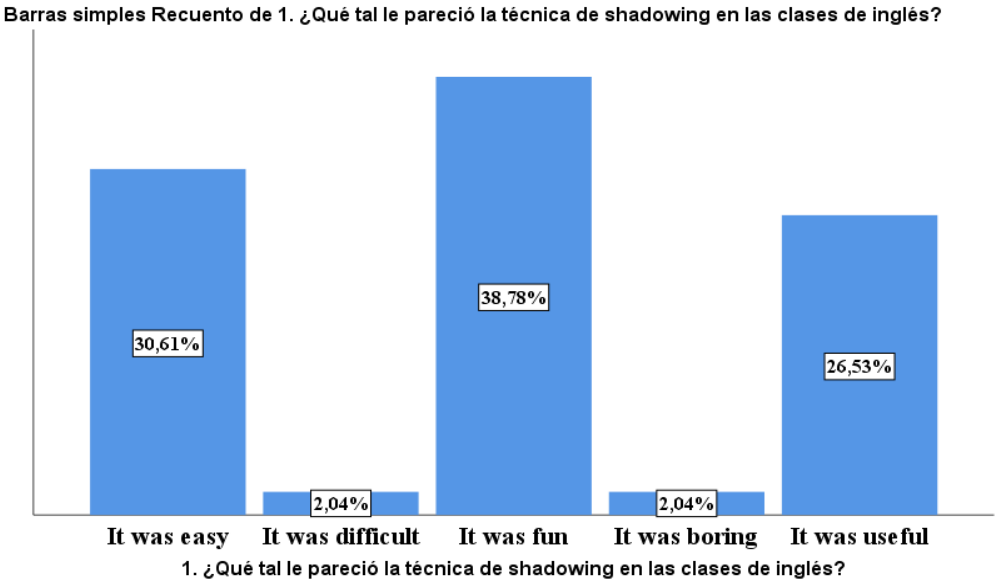
Figure 13 summarizes the results of the question regarding the material used to find out which one they liked the most. 48.7% said it would be the songs, 28.2% the movies, 20.5% the TV series, and only 2.6% said they like conversations about the text.

Figure 13. Percentage of answers to question 6. Would you like to practice the shadowing technique with material taken from: Songs, Movies, TV Series and Conversations from the English text.



The last question asked is about how they found the shadowing technique, offering adjectives such as easy, fun, difficult, boring, or useful. The answers that are represented in figure 14 aim mainly to show positive aspects of the program. In this way, 30.6% indicated that it was easy, 38.8% that it was fun, and 26.5% that it was useful. The results are displayed in Figure 14.

Figure 14. Percentage of responses to question 7. What did you think of the shadowing technique in class? It was easy, It was difficult, It was fun, It was boring, and/or It was useful.



4. Discussion

The finding of this study suggested that the listening comprehension skill of the experimental group could have improved due to the use of the shadowing technique in class in comparison with the control group. Similar results have been shown in previous studies in different contexts, especially in Asia (Dwi, 2019; Ginting, 2018; Hamada, 2011; Saito et al, 2011; Shimomura, 2018; Sumiyoshi and Svetanant, 2017; Zuhriyah, 2016).

Nonetheless, it is imperative to mention that the test contained five different parts, and there has been shown a significant difference between the experimental group and control group just in two parts out of the five in the test. Both parts share in common that they are made up of five short conversations. Part 1 is contextualized by using pictures whereas Part 4 is contextualized at the beginning of the listening with a short sentence. Parts 2, 3, and 5, on the other hand, are longer monologues or conversations about one topic contextualized at the beginning of the part.

Two processes are involved during listening: bottom-up and top-down. The former is the process of breaking out the sound into meaningful elements to understand it such as phonemes, words, intonation, stress, and tone; whereas the latter is a process that relies upon the context and knowledge of the listener to understand the message (Field, 2008; Vandergrift & Goh, 2012). The shadowing technique is supposed to aid in the bottom-up process by making the learners aware of the phonemes that form a word. However, in the results of this study, we can imply that not only the practice of the bottom-up process by shadowing was enough to perform better in the test, but also the contextualization (top-down process) was more helpful since it is kept better in the learners' memory while the short piece of audio is played. It is important to mention that this is only an assumption derived from the similarity of parts 1 and 4 in which students showed improvement.

Another aspect to take into account was the material used during the intervention with shadowing. According to Krashen's input hypothesis theory, students acquire the language only when the material used is "a little beyond" the level students are now (1982). However, Hamada (2012) stated that students can develop their listening comprehension skills faster and better when using materials with different levels of difficulty during the intervention of shadowing. In other words, i+1 and i-1. This study took into consideration this information and applied materials combining both levels. Furthermore, Saito et al. (2011) mentioned the importance of using interesting and enjoyable materials in shadowing. In this study, songs and conversations were used as materials; in which songs were chosen as more entertaining than practicing with materials that come up from the students' textbooks.

Regarding the perception of the experimental group on shadowing, most students perceived the experience as fun and useful to improve their listening skills. Sumiyoshi and Svetanant (2012) had similar results in which participants' point of view about shadowing was positive since they considered it to help them in their listening and speaking skills.

About the implication of this study, since shadowing focuses on the recognition of phonemes, the used material was on American and British accents. The A2 Key for school listening part had only a British accent. The mix of accents in the materials was due to students' request on listening to songs that they considered appealing, and thus their motivation and interest in the songs were crucial at the moment of choosing the material. In addition to songs, other materials were used such as conversations from the students' textbook and similar activities to the test. Both of them had a British accent. Nonetheless, they were considered boring for the students, so only a couple of times this kind of material was implemented.

It is also important to mention that some previous studies have shown a predisposition of improvement in the development of learner listening skills by using shadowing; however, some factors may have influenced the impact of the shadowing technique in the EFL class such as background noise that comes from the street, students' noise from surrounding classes, or the participants' noise at reproducing simultaneously. These kinds of noise may have hindered the listening step of the shadowing technique in which students have to pay close attention to the sounds to repeat them as accurately as possible.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be considered that shadowing is an effective technique to teach listening to A1 EFL students since the intervention had a positive impact on a general level of listening skill, especially in part 1: visual listening, and part 4: multiple choice questions about five short dialogues. Nonetheless, it is recommended to use the shadowing technique for a longer period of time to enhance listening skills.

Concerning the perception of the students on the use of shadowing, it is mostly positive towards the intervention, considering it is not only beneficial in terms of pronunciation and listening comprehension but also that it is fun, easy, and useful, especially when songs are used to learn.

Finally, since this study had the participation of only female students, it is suggested to conduct further research with heterogenous groups of students in age and gender to get more data on how these features may affect the results. Regarding the use of shadowing with a group of students with different English proficiency levels, previous studies advise it is more efficient to use this technique with low-proficiency language learners since they are building their bottom-up processing skills, and shadowing is of great help for that.

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