

# THE ROLE OF SHADOWING IN INTERPRETER TRAINING

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## **I. INTRODUCTION**

"Shadowing" is defined as "a paced, auditory tracking task which involves the immediate vocalization of auditorily presented stimuli, i.e., word-for-word repetition in the same language, parrot-style, of a message presented through headphones" (Lambert 1988:381). This technique has been used for many years by interpreter trainers as a pre-simultaneous exercise (Arjona 1978; Lambert 1988; Longley 1978; Schweda Nicholson 1987; Weber 1984). Moreover, some interpretation schools and programs include shadowing exercises in their screening and/or entrance examinations (Longley 1978; Moser-Mercer 1985; Schweda Nicholson 1986).

Recently, however, shadowing has come under scrutiny, and its value as both a screening device and a pre-simultaneous interpretation training technique has been questioned (Coughlin 1989; Gran 1989).

In light of the above, the current paper discusses: (1) the rationale for the inclusion of shadowing in screening examinations and training programs; (2) different types of shadowing and their respective uses; (3) how to select passages for shadowing; (4) trainees' common problems associated with shadowing; (5) appropriate instructor feedback; and (6) variations on shadowing techniques, i.e. how shadowing can be combined with additional exercises to create diverse levels of difficulty.

## **II. THE RATIONALE FOR SHADOWING**

Based on the author's experience and research in the field of conference interpreter training for the past nine years, the case in support of shadowing as a pre-simultaneous training technique is a strong one.

A key component of simultaneous interpretation is the interpreter's ability to speak and listen at the same time. Some trainees are initially distracted by this task, but can overcome their difficulty rather quickly (within seconds or minutes). Shadowing exercises were created to

address this particular problem. With continued practice and exposure to shadowing, trainees can perfect their ability to speak and listen simultaneously. Other students have extreme difficulty from the start in saying one thing while listening to another. They may, for example, show no improvement after a five-minute shadowing passage on a screening examination. In such a case, these students may simply not be suited for interpretation. One of the great values of shadowing exercises is their ability to quickly identify those candidates who appear to be promising trainees. Although several other components are included in the screening examination, shadowing has consistently proven to be a strong indicator of future performance.

One of the best arguments in favor of shadowing as a pre-simultaneous technique is that it stimulates, to a certain extent, the process of simultaneous interpretation. In other words, candidates are required to speak and listen at the same time; however, they are not required to take the source language (SL) ideas and convert them into target language (TL) structures. As a result, candidates are not threatened by an extremely complex cognitive task (simultaneous interpretation) initially, as they would be in the "sink-or-swim" method. From this perspective, shadowing exercises are viewed as an excellent preliminary stage in simultaneous interpreter training. Shadowing is considered a particularly valuable technique by those trainers who support the "cognitive" and/or "graduated difficulty" approach in the education of interpreters (Lambert 1988; Schweda Nicholson 1987).

## **III. DIFFERENT TYPES OF SHADOWING AND THEIR RESPECTIVE USES**

Shadowing is sometimes used by cognitive psychologists and psycholinguists as a research technique. Very often, the investigator is looking at the subject's attentional capacities and the potential for distraction during competing tasks.

In general, interpreters' trainers employ

shadowing exercises which involve (1) fluent texts and (2) lists of unrelated words and sentences. Unless specifically stated otherwise, discussion in the current article will center on the shadowing of fluent texts.

Lambert 1988 discusses Norman's (1976) work, which makes a distinction between two types of shadowing: (1) "phonemic shadowing" and "phrase shadowing". "Phonemic shadowing" involves repeating each sound as it is heard, without waiting for the completion of a meaning unit, or even a completed word, so that the shadower remains right 'on top' of the speaker" (381). "Phrase shadowing involves repetition of the "speech at longer latencies" (381). In the latter form of shadowing, those who shadow generally wait for a phrase or chunk of meaning before they begin their repetition task.

A third kind of shadowing can be called "adjusted lag" shadowing. In this type of shadowing, the student is asked to consciously stay, for example, from five to seven words behind the speaker. The length of lag can be adjusted to any number of words up to about ten. "Adjusted lag" shadowing is more difficult than "phonemic shadowing". It does not, however, require that the student listen for a unit of meaning before repeating. It simply stipulates that he/she must stay the required number of words behind the speaker.

The values and applications of phonemic shadowing are currently under debate. Lambert (1988) believes that phonemic shadowing is a worthwhile interpreter training exercise. The present author is also convinced of its usefulness. Coughlin (1989:108), however, writes: "...it is our position that phonemic shadowing should be completely abandoned...". Coughlin's rationale for the elimination of phonemic shadowing from interpreter training programs is that interpreters should be taught to deal with ideas ("meaningful units") and not words.

Certainly, no one would argue with the importance of meaning and ideas in the interpretation process. However, the current author sees some worthwhile applications of phonemic shadowing at the pre-simultaneous stage and beyond. For example, phonemic shadowing can be utilized in interpreter training to assist with the improvement of enunciation and pronunciation skills in second, third, and fourth languages. Although some interpreter trainees may be extremely competent in one or more passive languages, some amount of oral practice with the goal of achieving near-native intonation and stress patterns is almost always a necessity. Phonemic shadowing can be used for this purpose. In this connection as well, phonemic shadowing

can help the trainee to become quicker and more agile from an articulatory point of view as well as more comfortable with the phonemic patterns of the non-native language. Practice with tapes of varying speeds affords students the opportunity to build up their accuracy and completeness of repetition while they also master the ability to speak and listen simultaneously.

It was mentioned earlier that shadowing, in general, includes specific components of the simultaneous interpretation process without the total complexity of simultaneous interpretation itself. Phrase shadowing is closer to the simultaneous process than phonemic shadowing because it requires the shadower to wait until an idea or a unit of meaning is identified before beginning to repeat. In this way, the lag of the simultaneous interpreter is also simulated to a certain extent.

Adjusted lag shadowing can be viewed as an intermediate stage between phonemic and phrase shadowing. Although more difficult than phonemic shadowing, it does not require that meaning be identified before speaking - it does force the student, however, to consciously stay behind the speaker. As a result, it simulates the lag time of simultaneous interpretation. Also worthy of mention is that adjusted lag shadowing may be more taxing on short-term memory than either phonemic or phrase shadowing. Consequently, it can be viewed as having an intrinsic value distinctive from the other two types of shadowing.

Within the present discussion of shadowing varieties, it is interesting to note that those individuals who shadow with a longer lag (i.e., phrase and adjusted lag) have a stronger tendency to remember content information at the end of the exercise (Christovitch, Aliakrinskii and Abilian: 1960).

#### IV. SELECTION OF PASSAGES FOR SHADOWING

When an instructor chooses passages for shadowing exercises, a number of factors should be considered:

- (1) At what stage are the shadowers in their interpretation training program?
  - (a) beginning
  - (b) intermediate
  - (c) advanced
- (2) What is the purpose of the shadowing exercise?
  - (a) to improve pronunciation and articulation in non-native languages
  - (b) to accustom students to speaking and listening at the same time
  - (c) to challenge their attentional resources by

requiring shadowing in conjunction with another task

- (3) What is the trainees' level of knowledge in a particular subject matter area?
  - (a) novice (Use an introductory text.)
  - (b) a basic grasp of the discipline (Choose a text which builds on some arcane knowledge but challenges the trainees with new, more complex information.)
  - (c) a solid understanding of the field, including some of the discipline's finer points (Select a text which is more complex and which, perhaps, discusses the subject's relevance to related and unrelated fields.)
- (4) Will the texts be read by native or non-native speakers of the language?
  - (a) if native, is there a regional accent?
  - (b) if native, how fast is the speed?
  - (c) if non-native, how strong is the accent?
  - (d) if non-native, how fast is the speed?
- (5) Will the texts be altered in any way to make them more difficult from the perception point of view?
  - (a) text recorded at a very low volume
  - (b) variation of volume's loudness and softness throughout the text
  - (c) presence of white noise
  - (d) presence of other distracting noise (i.e. a telephone ringing, doors slamming, street noise (cars, honking horns).

The general rule is to choose materials which are representative of the work that the interpreter will be performing. For example, with the advent of new programs in court and immigration interpretation in particular; instructors should always select practice topics, dialogues, and texts which are relevant to the subject matter, participants and settings involved.

After the texts have been selected, the instructor must decide upon the speed at which they will be read (which will generally determine the speed at which the trainee will shadow). Of course, the delivery speed chosen by the instructor will necessarily rely on points (1), (2), (3), (4), and (5) above, as all of these factors must be considered in order to make optimal usage of the shadowing texts.

#### **V. TRAINEES' COMMON PROBLEMS ASSOCIATED WITH SHADOWING**

First and foremost, trainees must practise dividing their attention between listening and speaking. Initially, some complain that they are distracted by the sound of their own voice. Others may try to wait for the pauses between clauses or at the ends of sentences as an "avoidance" strategy to minimize speaking and listening at the

same time (Schweda Nicholson 1986). Shadowing in one's native (or dominant) language (even at very fast speeds) tends to be much easier for trainees than shadowing in acquired languages.

As a result, it is more methodologically sound to begin with shadowing in the native language. This exercise is less threatening than shadowing in non-native languages. Its introduction early in training will help to slowly build confidence among trainees.

In this connection, when the instructor increases the level of difficulty by, for example, requiring trainees to listen for meaning while shadowing completely and accurately, it will generally be easier for students to begin the dual-task exercise in their dominant language and then proceed to non-dominant languages later on.

#### **VI. APPROPRIATE INSTRUCTOR FEEDBACK**

The old adage "a picture is worth a thousand words" applies to shadowing as well. It is critically important for the instructor to demonstrate shadowing to trainees before asking them to attempt it on their own. The present author's introduction to shadowing consists of an explanation followed by a demonstration. The explanation tells students that they will be asked to "repeat exactly what they hear in the same language". For phonemic shadowing, the instructions "Stay as close behind the speaker as you can" are added. For phrase shadowing, students are instructed to "maintain a lag which will allow you to identify an idea before shadowing". For adjusted lag shadowing, trainees are told to "consciously stay between five to seven or, perhaps, seven to ten words behind the speaker".

After this brief explanation, the instructor asks a student to open a book, a newspaper, or a magazine and to begin reading out loud. The teacher then proceeds to demonstrate phonemic, phrase, and adjusted lag shadowing. A common occurrence at the beginning of such a demonstration is for the student to become distracted by the sound of his/her own reading combined with the voice of the shadower. Sometimes, students stop reading, as if to wait for the shadower to catch up.

When students shadow in the lab to the booths, instructors should focus on several factors regarding feedback:

- (1) adherence to the rules of phonemic, phrase and adjusted lag shadowing (especially lag time)
- (2) completeness of the shadowed passage
- (3) students' use of "avoidance" strategies (as discussed in section V)
- (4) articulation and voice

(5) intelligibility

(6) recovery speed after lapse in concentration

Some trainees require additional "mini" demonstrations which assist them in better identifying their problems. This author combines a demonstration of (1) "This is what you are doing" with (2) "This is what you should be doing". The instructor is responsible for clearly illustrating correct and incorrect shadowing techniques.

## **VII. VARIATIONS ON SHADOWING: DUAL- AND MULTIPLE-TASK EXERCISES**

The final section of this paper discusses specific uses of shadowing exercises in combination with other tasks. The first type to be described is one of the most common variations of shadowing.

Listening for content and meaning while shadowing is often used in interpreter training. Once again, ascertaining the meaning is primary in interpretation. Once the meaning has been identified, the interpreter transfers the SL ideas into the TL. The "content retention" technique may be used with either phonemic, phrase, or adjusted lag shadowing. In light of the nature of phrase shadowing, one may hypothesize that the phrase shadowing technique in combination with content retention will be more successful than a combination of the phonemic or adjusted lag and content retention methods. Such a research study is currently in development.

In any dual-task exercise, attentional resources must be divided accordingly. In the case of listening for meaning while shadowing, the instructor must impress upon the students the importance of completeness and accuracy in the shadowing task as well as excellent content retention at the end of the passage.

Content retention may be checked by the instructor in a number of ways. The student may be asked to: (1) respond to a series of oral questions which can only be answered if the student remembers the text and not by accessing general knowledge about the subject; (2) write a paragraph about the text; (3) give a short extemporaneous talk about the content immediately following the shadowing exercise; (4) enter into a discussion with other class members regarding the information contained in the passage; and/or (5) proceed through a number of steps which require the trainee to give the main idea as well as outline the supporting details. Moreover, if the students already know something about the subject at hand, they may also be asked to relate the new information in the current article to previously-learned information on the same or a related topic.

Listening for content and meaning can also be a

learning exercise for the trainees and it serves as excellent practice for "division of attention" tasks. Moreover, shadowing (in combination with listening for meaning) can assist in building cognitive flexibility and anticipatory skills which are fundamental components of the simultaneous interpretation process.

Although the author supports and utilizes this technique as part of a training program, it is interesting to note that when professional experienced interpreters were asked to (1) shadow and retain meaning and (2) interpret simultaneously and retain meaning in order to answer a series of subsequent content questions during a laterality study, many of them stated that they do not normally listen to retain meaning after the interpretation has been completed, but only to understand the meaning during the interpretation itself. A number of the research subjects stated that the study had created an artificial situation by requesting that they focus on the meaning in order to retain it after the fact (Green, Schweda Nicholson; Vaid, White and Steiner: in press).

In this connection, one of the research subjects in the aforementioned study recounted that, at times, he is a "sponge"; conversely, at other times, he is a "mirror". He elucidated by saying that he is a sponge if the subject matter he is interpreting is of interest to him; if not, he becomes a mirror and does not internalize any of the information he interprets.

Up to this point, this paper has discussed shadowing of fluent texts as a screening or pre-interpretation technique. "Hendrickx exercises" (more commonly known as "lag exercises") can also include a shadowing component (Hendrickx 1971). Once again, shadowing is viewed as a preliminary step in the interpretation process. Hendrickx proposes the lag exercises in order to (1) force the student to stay behind the speaker; (2) ensure that the student is speaking and listening at the same time; and (3) challenge the trainee's short-term memory. (For an illustration of lag exercises at the word level, see Lambert 1988).

Shadowing of fluent texts or shadowing of lag exercises may be combined with additional tasks in order to require further division of attention on the part of the trainee and also to make the task more complex. For example, in addition to requiring the student to shadow, he/she may also be asked to write the days of the week, the month of the year, or the numbers from one to one hundred or from one hundred in descending order in longhand. The language selected for this task may be either the language of the shadowing task itself or another working language of the trainee.

Moreover, if students have already undergone some consecutive training, the instructor might ask that they take notes while shadowing in preparation for a consecutive interpretation of the material at the end of the exercise. This type of exercise necessarily involves listening for meaning as well.

Arjona (1978) also provides some additional dual- or multiple-task exercises which can be combined with shadowing. For example, she suggests giving students a copy of a text which is very familiar to them, such as the Gettysburg address or the Preamble to the U.S. Constitution. According to Arjona, this text should be in the same language as the shadowing passage. The trainees are then asked to write out the text while they are shadowing.

### VIII. CONCLUSION

This brief paper has examined the value of shadowing (1) as a pre-simultaneous training technique and, to a lesser extent, (2) as a component of a screening examination.

Although there is some disagreement among professional trainers regarding its usefulness, shadowing is generally viewed as an effective training tool.

The varieties of shadowing cited in this paper (phonemic, phrase, and adjusted lag) can be utilized for a number of purposes, i.e. to work at eliminating the distraction involved when speaking and listening at the same time and to improve pronunciation and enunciation. Shadowing exercises can also be employed at different stages in training (beginning, intermediate and advanced). Moreover, shadowing can be combined with other tasks such as listening for meaning, writing, and notetaking.

In sum, shadowing is an exercise which has almost limitless applications, especially when combined with additional tasks. It is one of a wide variety of training techniques available to the interpreter trainer which will no doubt continue to be an important component of a pre-simultaneous interpretation course.

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