

# Effects of Shadowing and Dictation on Listening Comprehension Ability of EFL Learners

Tomokazu NAKAYAMA

*Josai University*

Akira IWATA

*Hokkaido Otaru Choryo Senior High School*

## Abstract

This article calls for a rethinking of the effectiveness of shadowing and dictation as means of developing listening comprehension ability in Japanese high school EFL classrooms. The participants were assigned to two groups: (a) one performed shadowing and dictation after completing listening drills and (b) the other engaged in grammar drills after the same listening drills. Both groups completed a 10-minute listening comprehension activity during regular classes. After 10 months, a posttest was conducted to check the improvement in the listening comprehension ability. The results revealed that group (a) outperformed group (b). The findings suggest that in the context of Japanese high school EFL classrooms, the listening comprehension instruction that combines shadowing and dictation can improve students' listening comprehension ability.

## 1. Introduction and Literature Review

### 1.1 Background

In recent times, it is an indisputable fact that listening comprehension ability is regarded as one of the most important skills in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context. In the first place, it is reported that among the four macro skills of listening, reading, speaking, and writing, high school students perceive listening to be the most difficult skill (Icho, 2003). Moreover, when we consider English tests, ranging from the widely recognized standardized tests such as TOEFL, IELTS, and TOEIC to local ones that include entrance examinations for schools, it would be difficult to find an English test that does not require listening comprehension. More

specifically, among various English tests, the one that has the greatest impact on Japanese high school students is the University Entrance Center Examination, which has adopted a listening comprehension section since 2006.

Considering this situation, it cannot be denied that there is a strong need for fostering solid listening comprehension ability in Japanese high school classrooms. However, how can EFL teachers help students improve this ability? Not many teachers as practitioners may have a concrete plan. Therefore, there is a need for teaching methods that are easy to adopt and apply in the context of different classrooms, but that are still practically effective and sustainable.

Shadowing and dictation, which have been gaining more attention in classrooms of late, are considered to be possible options. If we attempt to assess the effectiveness of a type of listening comprehension instruction that involves the simultaneous use of shadowing and dictation, the results obtained from those who currently employ this type of instruction may either be positive or negative. In any case, the results should have an impact on the listening comprehension practice in high schools.

## 1.2 Review of Previous Studies

Listening comprehension ability is becoming a more important factor for success not only in daily communication but also in academic settings, even in EFL countries such as Japan. Needless to say, it can be regarded as a crucial ability, especially for international students studying in English-speaking countries. As mentioned previously, Japanese high school students learning English are not the only ones who are struggling. International students who are nonnative speakers of English and are enrolled in different disciplines at American universities also seem to have difficulties with regard to listening comprehension. Powers (1985) surveyed 30 institutions in the U.S. When asked to indicate the relative importance of the four macro skills for international students to achieve success in their academic departments across disciplines, the professors rated listening comprehension ability as the second most important (p. 6). Hence, as Morley (1991, p. 82) argues, "The importance of listening cannot be underestimated; it is imperative that it not be treated trivially in second and foreign language curricula."

Until the 1980s, listening comprehension was taken for granted in the field of language pedagogy and activities related to this ability in foreign or second language classrooms merely involved testing and not teaching (Dunkel, 1991; Field, 1998; Meskill, 1996). In particular, dictation is mainly used as a testing device rather than a teaching device (Jafarpur &

Yamini, 1993). Recently, however, many different listening comprehension activities have been suggested for EFL classrooms; the primary aim of these activities is teaching rather than testing (e.g., Ur, 1984). Shadowing and dictation are included among these activities. According to Ur (1984, p. 128), both of these practices involve repetition and mimicry, which are considered to be valuable as comprehension exercises because in order to reproduce a sentence, one has to listen carefully not only to grasp the sounds but also the meaning. In particular, dictation contains the target language in both aural and written form, and the written form of the text can serve as visuals to diminish the decoding load of learners. Therefore, it enables them to reach a deeper level of processing than mere aurally repeated text (Meskill, 1996; Oller, 1979). These might be some of the reasons why these activities are encouraged in EFL classrooms.

In Japanese EFL classrooms, shadowing and dictation as means of teaching listening comprehension are now widely used, and their practical effects have been examined (e.g., Sugiura, Takeuchi, & Baba, 2002; Tamai, 2005).

Shadowing usually refers to the activity wherein students listen to the aural input and try to repeat it orally as soon as they have heard it. Generally, it is often broken down into two types—namely, prosody shadowing and contents shadowing. The primary difference between these two types of shadowing concerns the amount of attention that is paid to the prosody and contents of the text. The former focuses more on prosody, and the latter on meaning. In the field of language teaching, shadowing is assumed to be effective for learning the prosodic features of the target language and for improving the listening and speaking abilities (Okada, 2002; Takizawa, 1998).

Dictation, an activity that most EFL teachers are familiar with, should be orthographic text dictation, wherein students transcribe a unified passage. It is considered to reinforce the spelling/sound correlations of English and reveal comprehension and grammatical weaknesses (Sawyer & Silver, 1972). Field (1998) suggests that dictation as post-listening exercises can be effective for solving the problems of syntactic parsing. He also argues for the importance of teaching sub-skills through dictation as a means of micro-listening practice in classrooms. Sugiura, Takeuchi, and Baba (2002) point out the advantage of dictation in classrooms as this activity is relatively easy to conduct and easy for learners to check themselves.

In Japan, recently, an increasing amount of classroom research has been conducted on the effects of shadowing and dictation in English teaching pedagogy. There are many studies that report the positive impact of these

activities on students' motivation or attitude toward learning English (Eguchi, 2007; Iwabuchi, 2002; Kadoyama, 2008; Orita, 2000; Ozasa, 1989; Sato & Nakamura, 1998; Shimo, 2005; Wiltshier, 2007). Iwabuchi (2002) used dictation for university freshmen in his class; the class met once a week and performed the activity for 20 minutes each time. In his study, 42 out of the 46 students responded positively regarding the effectiveness of dictation, and the experimental group showed significant improvement in terms of its motivation toward English listening. Shimo (2005) conducted research on the effects of a collaborative shadowing activity in her university English class and found that students with a lower proficiency level from the basic classes enjoyed the activity significantly more and found it to be more beneficial than students with a higher proficiency level. Orita (2000) reported that 80 percent of his students responded that shadowing and dictation exercises were either useful or very useful for improving their listening comprehension ability.

In spite of reports that showed positive effects on the motivation of the students and on the behavior toward English listening, until now there has been no consensus about whether shadowing and dictation can improve the overall listening comprehension ability of EFL learners. While some researchers have demonstrated positive results (Onaha, 2004; Sato & Nakamura, 1998, 1999; Sugiura, Takeuchi, & Baba, 2002; Tokunaga & Eguchi, 2007), others have been unable to do so (Iwabuchi, 2002; Jafarpur & Yamini, 1993; Kadoyama, 2008; Komuro, 2005; Taura, 2000).

In particular, Sugiura, Takeuchi, and Baba (2002) researched the effectiveness of dictation for 147 Japanese EFL university students in Japan. The study employed dictation activities in class using a dictation sheet, a printed transcript with 100 blanks. The students were also asked to dictate an approximately 3-minute text at home and submit the sheet after marking it themselves. There was no time limit, so that the students could listen to the text as many times as they wanted. After the activities had been implemented for 4 months (13 classes), there was a considerable improvement in the listening abilities of students. Onaha (2004) argues that shadowing and dictation expand phonological memory and improve the ability to pay attention to English prosody. As a result, both activities improved the listening comprehension ability of the university students. Kadoyama (2008), on the other hand, used movies for dictation activities. The university students were shown the Japanese subtitles before they dictated them in English. After performing this activity for 12 weeks, it was found that the dictation activity had no effect on the improvement of their listening comprehension ability. Some researchers also suggest that the effectiveness of shadowing training on the improvement of listening

comprehension ability is limited to students with a relatively lower proficiency level (Sato & Nakamura, 1999; Yanagihara, 1995).

One point that should be noted here is that in the studies discussed above, the activities such as shadowing and dictation were largely utilized as homework. This suggests that it might sometimes be difficult to know the exact amount of time that students spent on these activities. Another point to be noted is that in most of the cases, the class activities used both shadowing and dictation, although the degree of allocated time and effort differed. Although they are very few in number, some studies have focused exclusively on investigating the effect of either shadowing or dictation. For example, Iwashita (2008) tried to eliminate visual information as much as possible in her study on the effectiveness of shadowing. However, when we consider a real-life classroom setting, this carefully controlled environment might be rather complex and sometimes unnatural. This is because many teachers now believe that both activities are effective for improving students' listening comprehension ability. As a result, both the activities are often adopted simultaneously. Hence, in this study, it should be worth investigating the combined effects of shadowing and dictation in the Japanese high school setting, where there exist such limitations as relatively huge class size, availability of a relatively short time for listening activity, and feasibility and sustainability of conducting the activities during class time and not as homework.

### **1.3 Aims of this study**

This study aims to determine whether the instruction using shadowing and dictation simultaneously after the listening practice drills can improve learners' listening comprehension ability more than that using grammar drills after the same listening practice drills in Japanese high school EFL classrooms.

## **2. Method**

### **2.1 Participants**

The participants of this study were 151 high school students in the tenth grade (male: 78 and female: 73). All the participants were native speakers of Japanese. They were assigned to one of two groups, which consisted of two homerooms: Grammar group (male: 39 and female: 37) and Dictation group (male: 39 and female: 36).

Each group had one teacher: the author taught the Dictation group and another teacher instructed the Grammar group.

## 2.2 Materials

*Textbooks.* As materials, three listening training books (Kiriharashoten Henshubu, 2006a, 2006b; Matsuzaka, 2006) were used for both the groups. However, only for the Dictation group, dictation sheets, which were transcripts with blanks accompanied by Japanese translations on the back of the sheets, were produced. Similarly, grammar drill (Wada, 2007) was used only for the Grammar group.

*Global Test of English Communication (GTEC) for Students.* GTEC for Students, a standardized test developed by the Benesse Corporation, consists of reading, writing, and listening sections. In this research, only the results of the listening section of GTEC for Students Basic (11th), which has a maximum score of 250 points, were used in order to ensure the homogeneity of the English listening comprehension ability of both groups. The listening section of the test comprises four parts and each part includes 10 items. The types of questions are similar to those of the TOEIC test. Part A requires students to choose the statement that best describes each picture; Part B involves selecting the best response to each question; Part C requires students to look at the illustration, listen to the context in Japanese, and then select the best answer to each question in a short conversation. Finally, Part D involves listening to short talks and then choosing the best answer to each question that is printed in the test book. This test was conducted in May 2007 at the high school to which the participants of this study belong. Further, another GTEC for Students Basic (13th), which served as the posttest, was conducted after the activity in order to compare the improvement in the listening comprehension ability of each group.

*Classes.* The participants took two English subjects—namely, English I and Oral Communication I. English I consisted of four weekly classes, and Oral Communication I, of two weekly classes. In total, they attended six 50-minute weekly English classes. Listening training using the materials specified above was conducted only in English I classes, which means that the participants regularly had training four times a week, except in the case of special occasions (e.g., summer and winter vacations, mid-term and final examinations in each semester, and other school events). Approximately 10 minutes were allocated for the training in each class. The class procedures of English I were the same for both groups, other than the approximately 10-minute listening training. Moreover, there was no difference between the two groups with regard to the class procedures of the other English subject (Oral Communication I), which was taught by the teacher who did not teach English I. Hence, it can safely be said that both the groups had equivalent English class experiences, except for the

approximately 10-minute listening training.

### 2.3 Procedure

The procedure differed for the two groups of students, which consisted of two homerooms. The pretest (GTEC for Students Basic (11th)) was conducted in May 2007 before the study began; it confirmed that there was no significant difference between the two groups with regard to their listening comprehension ability,  $t(149) = -1.25, p = 0.21$ . Two different instructors taught the two different groups. The class procedures were almost the same and involved the same materials, except for the listening training for which approximately 10 minutes of each class were allocated. One instructor taught the Grammar group and the other taught the Dictation group.

The Grammar group answered the questions in the listening training textbooks; they then immediately checked their answers. After that, they completed the grammar drills for approximately 5 minutes, which focused on the grammatical points they were learning at that time in English I. The Dictation group used the same listening training textbooks, and then they spent approximately 5 minutes dictating the script of the listening training materials. They listened to the material twice and filled in the blanks on the sheet, which had the printed script with many blanks. Following the dictation, the participants tried shadowing the script twice. In the first attempt, they were allowed to look at the script; hence, technically, parallel reading was allowed. However, in the second attempt, they were asked to avoid using the script for shadowing as much as possible. The instructor suggested that they concentrate on either the prosody or the content of the listening materials.

The procedure continued from June 2007 to March 2008 and the posttest (GTEC for Students Basic (13th)) was conducted in April 2008 in order to find out if there was any significant difference in the improvement of the listening comprehension ability between the two groups.

### 2.4 Scoring

Immediately after both the pre- and posttests were completed, they were sent to the Benesse Corporation for scoring. It took almost a month for the test to be scored and standardized on each occasion. Although a total of 159 students actually enrolled in the four homerooms, 8 students were eliminated from the data because they did not take either the pretest, posttest, or both the tests.

### 3. Results

This section presents the scores on the listening pre- and posttests and the improvement from the pre- to the posttest. The statistics in Table 1 show the mean scores, standard deviations of the pretest among the groups. Table 2 also describes the mean scores and standard deviations among the groups on the posttest.

In order to ascertain whether the instruction using shadowing and dictation simultaneously after the listening practice drills can improve the learners' listening comprehension ability more than that using grammar drills after the same listening practice drills in Japanese high school EFL classrooms, the increases in the mean scores from the pretest to the posttest were compared. A *t*-test was conducted on the increases in the mean scores of the groups. It yielded a significant difference between the two groups, as shown in Table 3,  $t(149) = -2.78, p < 0.01$ .

**Table 1: Means and Standard Deviations of Scores on the Pretest by Group**

Test (Pretest)	Group	
GTEC Basic (11th)	Dictation Group ( $n = 75$ )	Grammar Group ( $n = 76$ )
<i>M</i> (out of 250)	164.41	161.61
<i>SD</i>	20.75	25.53

*Note.* *M* represents the means and *SD* represents the standard deviation. For all tests,  $n = 151$ .

**Table 2: Means and Standard Deviations of Scores on the Posttest by Group**

Test (Posttest)	Group	
GTEC Basic (13th)	Dictation Group ( $n = 75$ )	Grammar Group ( $n = 76$ )
<i>M</i> (out of 250)	183.95	169.82
<i>SD</i>	31.82	31.37

**Table 3: Increase from the Pretest to the Posttest**

Tests	Group		$t(149)$	
	Dictation Group ( $n = 75$ )	Grammar Group ( $n = 76$ )	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
GTEC Basic 13th - 11th			-2.78	$p < 0.01$
<i>M</i>	19.53	8.19		
<i>SD</i>	25.42	24.16		



#### 4. Discussion

The primary aim of this study was to examine whether or not the instruction using shadowing and dictation simultaneously after listening practice drills can improve learners' listening comprehension ability more than that using grammar drills after the same listening practice drills in Japanese high school EFL classrooms. With respect to this research question, the results strongly indicated a positive effect of the instruction with the combination of shadowing and dictation. The students who were regularly trained during class time using shadowing and dictation outperformed those who were not trained using shadowing and dictation. This suggests that a relatively long period of regular instruction in class, even if the time allocated for each lesson is short, significantly improved the students' listening comprehension ability.

As suggested by previous research (Sato & Nakamura, 1999; Tamai, 2005), shadowing training should be introduced after the learners understand the contents of the target text because its main purpose is not decoding the text but acquiring the skill to repeat the text accurately. Tamai (2005) also argues that prosody shadowing should be practiced first, followed by contents shadowing. In this study, however, the teacher did not provide clear instructions to the students when they were to attempt both prosody shadowing and contents shadowing because in a real classroom setting, the learners' proficiency levels differ inherently. It follows that some are able to try contents shadowing and others are not. Thus, it is safe to say that the method of introduction should fit the real-life teaching context.

While effective listeners are aware of when they stop paying attention and try to redirect their attention, ineffective listeners are not aware of this. The latter often stopped listening when they encountered an unknown word or phrase (O'Malley, Chamot & Kupper, 1989, p. 428). Shadowing, however, was shown to improve the ability to concentrate and attend to the aural text (Tamai, 2005), and 5-day intensive training of shadowing was shown to be effective in improving the students' listening comprehension ability (Iwashita, 2008). As I have argued, shadowing in this study could have been as effective as it was in Iwashita's study. This is because although the activities were implemented for as short a period as approximately 10 minutes, the training period was as long as 10 months.

For dictation, this study adopted texts with many blanks, which was very similar to the cloze test sheet. In this respect, Sugiura, Takeuchi, and Baba (2002) suggest that such a text may function as efficient bottom-up processing training, the way the cloze test usually does.

This study is significant in that it empirically demonstrates the effectiveness of the introduction of shadowing and dictation in a real-life classroom setting. In other words, it shows the combined effects of the activities under such restrictions as relatively large class size, availability of short class time, and varied proficiency levels of students. However, in order to develop a more efficient and effective mode of instruction, we should shed light on the following points in future research: duration and frequency of the instruction and duration of class time that should be allocated for the instruction. Both teachers and students definitely need an effective, feasible, and sustainable plan to improve listening comprehension ability.

### References

- Dunkel, P. (1991). Listening in the native and second/foreign language: toward an integration of research and practice. *TESOL Quarterly*, 25, 431-457.
- Eguchi, M. (2007). The practice of shadowing using CALL system. *Memoirs of the Kure Technical College*, 69, 25-31.
- Field, J. (1998). Skills and strategies: towards a new methodology for listening. *ELT Journal*, 52, 110-118.
- Icho, H. (2003). Kokosei no risuningu niokeru tsumazuki wo ishiki shita shido [Listening instruction that takes into account high school students' difficulty]. *Step Bulletin*, 15, 51-61.
- Iwabuchi, T. (2002). Dikuteishon wo riyou shita risuningu shido no kokoromi [An attempt at listening instruction using dictation]. *Senshu Daigaku Gaikokugokyoiku Ronshu*, 30, 15-37.
- Iwashita, M. (2008). The effectiveness of shadowing training on Japanese learners - based on a month-long longitudinal study-. *Hiroshima Daigaku Daigakuin Kyouikugaku Kenkyuka Kiyō*, 57, 219-228.
- Jafarpur, A., & Yamini, M. (1993). Does practice with dictation improve language skills? *System*, 21, 359-369.
- Kadoyama, T. (2008). Effects of film-based dictation practice on listening comprehension skills: Does watching films with Japanese subtitles facilitate language learning? *Eibeibunka* 38, 95-115.
- Kiriharashoten Henshubu. (2006a). *Hyper listening elementary new edition 10-minute English listening training*. Tokyo: Kiriharashoten.
- Kiriharashoten Henshubu. (2006b). *Hyper listening elementary plus new edition 10-minute English listening training*. Tokyo: Kiriharashoten.
- Komuro, T. (2005). Does three months of English instruction make a difference? *Gogaku Kyoiku Kenkyu Ronsyu*, 22, 199-213.

- Matsuzaka, H. (2006). *Listening skills*. Tokyo: Sukenshuppan.
- Meskill, C. (1996). Listening skills development through multimedia. *Journal of Educational Multimedia and Hypermedia*, 5, 179-201.
- Morley, J. (1991). Listening comprehension in second/foreign language instruction. In M. Celce-Murcia (Ed.), *Teaching English as a second or foreign language* (2nd ed., pp. 81-106). New York: Newbury House.
- Okada, A. (2002). The usefulness of shadowing on prosody teaching of English. *Bulletin of Tsukuba International University*, 8, 117-129.
- Oller, J. (1979). *Tests of productive oral communication, Language Tests at School: A pragmatic approach*, London: Longman. 303-339.
- O'Malley, J. M., Chamot, A. U., & Kupper, L. (1989). Listening comprehension strategies in second language acquisition. *Applied Linguistics*, 10, 418-437.
- Onaha, H. (2004). Effect of shadowing and dictation on listening comprehension ability of Japanese EFL learners based on the theory of working memory. *JACET bulletin*, 39, 137-148.
- Orita, M. (2000). Japanese novice EFL learners and features of the stream of speech: replication activities. *Annual Review of English Learning and Teaching*, 5, 1-16.
- Ozasa, K. (1989). Effective use of the dictation method in developing students' listening comprehension skills in ESL/EFL classrooms. *Studies, Seiwa College bulletin*, 17, 53-62.
- Powers, D. (1985). *A survey of academic demands related to listening skills* (TOEFL Res. No. 20). Princeton, NJ: Educational Testing Service.
- Sato, T., & Nakamura, N. (1998). The effects of shadowing and the students' feedback. *Bulletin of Tsukuba International University*, 4, 47-57.
- Sato, T., & Nakamura, N. (1999). Teaching listening comprehension and its effective learning environments. *Bulletin of Tsukuba International University*, 5, 15-28.
- Sawyer, J. O., & Silver, S. K. (1972). Dictation in language learning. In Allen, H. B., & Campbell, R. N. (Eds.), *Teaching English as a second language* (pp.223-229). San Francisco: McGraw-Hill International Book Company.
- Shimo, E. (2005). The effective use of collaborative shadowing activities in second language classrooms. *Miyazaki Municipal University*, 13, 85-99.
- Sugiura, M., Takeuchi, S., & Baba, K. (2002). Risuningu noryoku yosei no tameno jiritsu gakushu: dikuteishon no koka [Autonomous learning for developing listening comprehension ability: the effects of dictation]. *Nagoya Daigaku Gengo Bunkabu Kokusai Gengo Bunka Kenkyuka*, 25, 105-121.
- Takizawa, M. (1998). Application of interpreter training techniques to English language learning (1): Emphasis on shadowing. *Bulletin of Hokuriku University*, 22, 217-232.

- Tamai, K. (2005). *Risuningu shidoho toshite no shadoingu no kunrenkoka ni kansuru kenkyu* [Research on the effects of shadowing training as a means of listening instruction]. Tokyo: Kazamashobo.
- Taura, H. (2000). Teaching Methodology/Material effects on L2 listening comprehension development in Japanese EFL learners. *Journal of Fukui Medical University, 1*, 545-568.
- Tokunaga, S. & Eguchi, M. (2007). How could the students' listening comprehension ability be improved?: An investigation of strategies using TOEIC listening sections part II and III. *The Japanese Red Cross Kyushu International College of Nursing, Intramural Research Report, 2*, 72-85.
- Ur, P. (1984). *Teaching listening comprehension*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wada, M. (2007). *Seed English grammar 40 units workbook*. Tokyo: Buneido.
- Wiltshier, J. (2007). Fluency through shadowing-What, why, and how? In K. Bradford-Watts (Ed.), *JALT 2006 Conference Proceedings*. Tokyo: JALT.
- Yanagihara, Y. (1995). A study of teaching methods for developing English listening comprehension – the effects of shadowing and dictation. *Language Laboratory, 32*, 73-89.