

*Improvement of Listening Skills of Thai Elementary Japanese Learners
Using the Top-down Shadowing Approach*

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Abstract

A common problem for Thai elementary Japanese learners is a failure in listening comprehension despite learning quite a lot of vocabulary and grammar. Thus, the author conducted a study by using the top-down shadowing approach for approximately three months to develop the listening skills of a group of Thai elementary Japanese learners. This study found that this approach could improve their listening skills, which enhanced their listening comprehension. A significant change involved the scores they achieved on the post tests, including the SPOT Test and the JLPT Test (Level 3). Based on an inquiry with the learners, they believed that shadowing was beneficial for the improvement in their listening skills and they would practice it on their own in the future.

Keywords: Listening Skills, Thai Elementary Japanese Learners, Top-down Shadowing

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Introduction

Communication plays a key role in human life, especially at the present time with an overload of information, which is called the globalization era. Beneficial to both to individuals and society, communication broadens knowledge and worldviews. Language is a critical factor in communication, especially with respect to both spoken and written language. In the globalization era, Thais need to communicate with foreigners more than in the past, for trade and investments, education, tourism, and daily activities. This has alerted Thais to the development of skills in foreign languages, e.g. English, Chinese, Korean, and Japanese.

According to a survey of Japanese language institutes overseas in 2015 by the Japan Foundation (2016: 1), in Thailand, there were 173,817 Japanese language learners, 606 Japanese language institutes, and 1,911 Japanese language instructors. These figures showed an increase from the 2012 survey. Across the country, there are many secondary schools and universities where Japanese is taught as a major subject. More and more Thai Japanese learners take the Japanese Language Proficiency Test (JLPT), which measures and certifies Japanese proficiency for non-native Japanese speakers held both inside and outside of Japan. Developed for measuring the overall Japanese communication proficiency level, the test consists of three parts – Language Knowledge (Japanese characters, vocabulary and grammar), Reading, and Listening. There are a lot of Thai Japanese students who have passed the JLPT at the N4 or N3 Levels but are poor in listening comprehension in actual conversations. Some may understand what is being said when they converse with others, but they are unable to respond, failing to communicate using their knowledge about Japanese grammar, vocabulary, or idioms in an appropriate manner in actual situations.

To develop learners' Japanese communication skills, different foreign language learning strategies are utilized, e.g. role play, listening skills training using computer programs, and shadowing. Tamai (2005: 37) defines shadowing as repeating what one has heard correctly immediately or a little while after, which is a basic technique for those who will become interpreters.

1. Related Research

There are a significant number of research works on shadowing-based language skill development for English learners, while that for Japanese learners is limited. Below is a discussion on the research on Japanese skill development using the shadowing technique.

Sakoda and Matsumi (2004) investigated the effects of shadowing of four native English speakers who studied in Japan, whose Japanese proficiency was at an intermediate level. They all had to practice shadowing in Japanese class once a week for a period of 10 months, during which their instructor recommended that they practice it every day, if possible. These learners were lent a portable audio recorder for shadowing practice. The 10-month experiment was divided into four periods. The experiment showed a dramatic increase in the number of words and parts of speech which they used from the first week to the fourth week. Furthermore, their working memory was assessed using the reading span test, which was held one month after the end of the shadowing practice. The test revealed an improvement in their Japanese skills at the end of the shadowing practice. Later, Sakoda & Matsumi (2005) carried

out an experiment to compare the effects between the shadowing and reading aloud techniques. The samples in this experiment consisted of 29 Korean university students who took a one-month Japanese course. They were divided into two groups, with Group A practicing shadowing and Group B practicing reading aloud approximately 15 minutes before and after class. The materials involved upper basic Japanese articles, each containing 500-600 characters. After the end of the practice, their Japanese proficiency was evaluated using the following tests: 1. SPOT Test, 2. Japanese Language Proficiency Test (JLPT, Level 3, Vocabulary, Grammar, and Reading Parts), 3. Dictation, 4. Digit Span Test, and 5. Listening Span Test. The finding was that the post-test scores of Group A learners were higher than their pre-test scores for the SPOT Test, JLPT Test, and Dictation. Group B learners' post-test scores were significantly higher than their pre-test scores for the SPOT Test and Dictation. The JLPT pre-test and post-test scores were similar. The post-test scores for the Digit Span Test were significantly higher than the pre-test scores for both groups, while their pre-test and post-test scores for the Listening Span Test were similar. Given the scores, shadowing and reading aloud resulted in an improvement in their Japanese proficiency and memory span. However, only shadowing enhanced their vocabulary, grammar and reading proficiency – it provided them with the improvement in their semantic processing proficiency.

Sakoda, Furumoto et al. (2006) investigated the effects of shadowing in a group of Japanese language learners with different Japanese proficiency levels. They were divided into three groups – elementary, intermediate, and advanced learners. In this experiment, the learners had to practice shadowing for 15 minutes before and after the Japanese class every day. This experiment utilized two sets of articles, the first one featuring a speed of 3.5 characters per minute and the other, five characters per second. After the end of the practice, they were evaluated through the following tests – 1. SPOT Test, 2. Japanese Language Proficiency Test (JLPT) (Level 3, Vocabulary, Grammar, and Reading Parts), 3. J Test, 4. Digit Span Test, and 5. Listening Span Test. A significant difference was only found between the pre-test and post-test scores of the JLPT Test (Level 3) and the J Test of elementary learners. This showed that even one-month shadowing dramatically affected their Japanese proficiency. The impact of the difficulty levels of these articles was assessed on 30 Korean Japanese learners, whose Japanese proficiency was at the same level. They were divided into two groups, with Group A using an immediate learner textbook and Group B using an advanced learner textbook. The speed and the number of words were controlled to be at the same level. The pre-test and post-test based evaluation involved the following tests: 1. SPOT Test, 2. Japanese Language Proficiency Test (JLPT), Level 1-2, 3. J-Test, and 4. Listening Span Test. The post-test test scores for the SPOT Test and JLPT Test for Groups A and B were significantly higher than their pre-test scores. For Group B, which used the advanced learner textbook, their post-test scores for the J-Test and JLPT Test were significantly higher than their pre-test scores in the listening and vocabulary sections. Given the scores, Sakoda & Matsumi (2007) concluded that using a textbook, the level of which is above learner proficiency ($i+1$), can improve learner proficiency.

Only one study on the effects of shadowing on Thai Japanese learners is available, which was conducted by Methapisit, T. (2011). This study investigated the impact of shadowing among Thai Japanese learners in terms of speaking skills improvement. The speed of reading aloud before and after shadowing and the accuracy of

pronunciation during shadowing served as indicators of speaking skills. The study found that: 1) Shadowing was beneficial to the improvement of speaking skills in terms of speed and fluency; 2) Shadowing helped to correct inaccurate pronunciation, and in particular, the accuracy of pronunciation was significantly better in the second practice; 3) Errors found in pronunciation included stress, intonation in compound words, pronunciation of words with ち or つ, pronunciation of loan words, and pronunciation of expressions at the end of a sentence.

2. Research Objectives

This research aimed to study the effects of shadowing through the use of two questions, as follows:

- 1) How much can shadowing improve Japanese listening comprehension?
- 2) What are the learners' views about the outcomes of shadowing?

Research Methodology

The research was divided into two parts – 1. Experiment and 2. Questionnaire-based survey. The experiment consisted of the following:

2.1 Sample group

The samples of this research consisted of 27 Thai elementary Japanese learners, four of whom passed the JLPT Test, Level 5.

2.2 Lessons in the experiment

The lessons in the experiment consisted of text and audio files from the textbook entitled “Listening Tasks For Beginners Everyday Listening in 50 days Vol.2” 『初級日本語聴解練習 毎日聞き取り50日 下』 (L), published by BONJINSHA.

4.3 Shadowing process

- 1) Listening
- 2) Mumbling
- 3) Synchronized reading and checking meanings.
- 4) Prosody shadowing.
- 5) Content shadowing.

The learners practiced shadowing for 10-15 minutes at the beginning of the class twice a week for a period of 10 weeks. For each class, the learners were given an assignment to practice shadowing. In the subsequent class, each of the learners was asked to shadow the article they had reviewed in class.

2.3 Data collection and analysis

The assessment of the listening skills development of the experimental group was conducted using the following pre-test and post-test questions:

- 1) SPOT (Simple Performance-Oriented Test)

Developed by Tsukuba University, this test aims to evaluate the actual Japanese proficiency of learners. A sentence with one pair of brackets appears on the screen and the audio track for the sentence is played simultaneously. After listening to the track, they have to select one of four hiragana choices to fill in the brackets (Obayashi et al.: 1995).

- 2) Old JLP Test (Level 3, Listening Part)

- 3) Statistical analysis and questionnaire-based inquiry.

2.4 Results and Discussion

Shadowing helped to develop Japanese listening comprehension based on the pre-test and post-test results.

1) SPOT pre-test and post-test results

Table 1: SPOT Pre-Test and Post-Test Results (27 Samples)

	Pre-Test	Post-Test
Mean (M)	71.59	81.70
Standard deviation (S.D)	6.27	3.48

The mean post-test scores of the SPOT Test had approximately a 10 point increase. The standard deviation (S.D.) of the pre-test scores was 6.27, and that of the post-test scores had a 3.48 decrease, which showed that the listening ability of the sample group had a similar increase.

2) JLPT (Level 3) pre-test and post-test results

Table 2: JLPT (Level 3) Pre-test and Post-test Results (27 Samples)

	Pre-Test	Post-Test
Mean (M)	81.15	86.07
Standard deviation (S.D)	2.78	3.60

The post-test score of the JLPT Test, Level 3 test showed a significant increase (2.78 → 3.60, $df = 26$, $t = -5.93$, $p < 0.05$).

1) Summary of shadowing in the experimental group.

Table 3: Summary of the Results of Shadowing Practice in the Experimental Group

No.	Item	Mean score (Out of 5)
1	I feel that my listening skill after shadowing is better than before shadowing.	4.32
2	While shadowing, I think of the content of the article I have listened to.	4.21
3	While shadowing, I understand the content without translating it into Thai first.	3.98
4	While shadowing, I think of the sentence structure at the same time.	4.35
5	While shadowing, I use the basic knowledge about that matter to improve my comprehension.	3.72
6	Difficulty and easiness of the content affects shadowing practice.	4.24
7	Speed of reading of the content affects shadowing.	4.16
8	Shadowing allows me to have better comprehension of what I have listened to.	4.58
9	I like shadowing and will practice it on my own.	4.45

The questionnaire used for surveying the experimental group's opinions about the effects of the shadowing technique consisted of five rating-scale points (1-5): Strongly disagree, Relatively disagree, Neutral, Relatively Agree, and Strongly Agree. There were 27 respondents. The mean scores are presented in Table 3.

As it can be seen from the above table, the group of learners strongly agreed that their listening skills were better than before shadowing. They believed that shadowing provided them with a tool to have a better comprehension of what they had listened to. This was because while shadowing, they thought of the sentence structure, which provided them with listening comprehension without having to translate it into Thai. This enhanced their overall Japanese listening skills. They also believed that the level of difficulty of the content had a great impact on shadowing and that the speed of the audio tracks affected their shadowing practice.

Conclusion

Based on the two objectives of the study, the following conclusion was developed:

- 1) Shadowing helped to improve listening skills of elementary Japanese learners, which resulted in improved listening comprehension. A clear improvement was witnessed through the post-test scores for the SPOT Test and JLPT Test (Level 3). This was because top-down shadowing practice helped the learners to observe sentence structures and understand the overall contents of the articles without having to translate them into Thai first.
- 2) According to the inquiry with the learners, they felt confident that shadowing was beneficial to the improvement of their listening skills. More importantly, they liked to practice shadowing and said they would practice it on their own in the future.

This research was experimental research, which had the following limitations:

- 1) The number of samples was limited, which made it impossible to compare two groups: with and without shadowing practice. In addition, the results between the bottom-up shadowing and top-down shadowing should be assessed in order to identify how the shadowing practices will have an impact on listening skill development. Furthermore, the experimental group's proficiency should be evaluated using standardized tests to ensure that they do not have a different Japanese proficiency level.
- 2) The evaluation of learners' language proficiency should include a test which encompasses all skills, e.g. role-play.

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