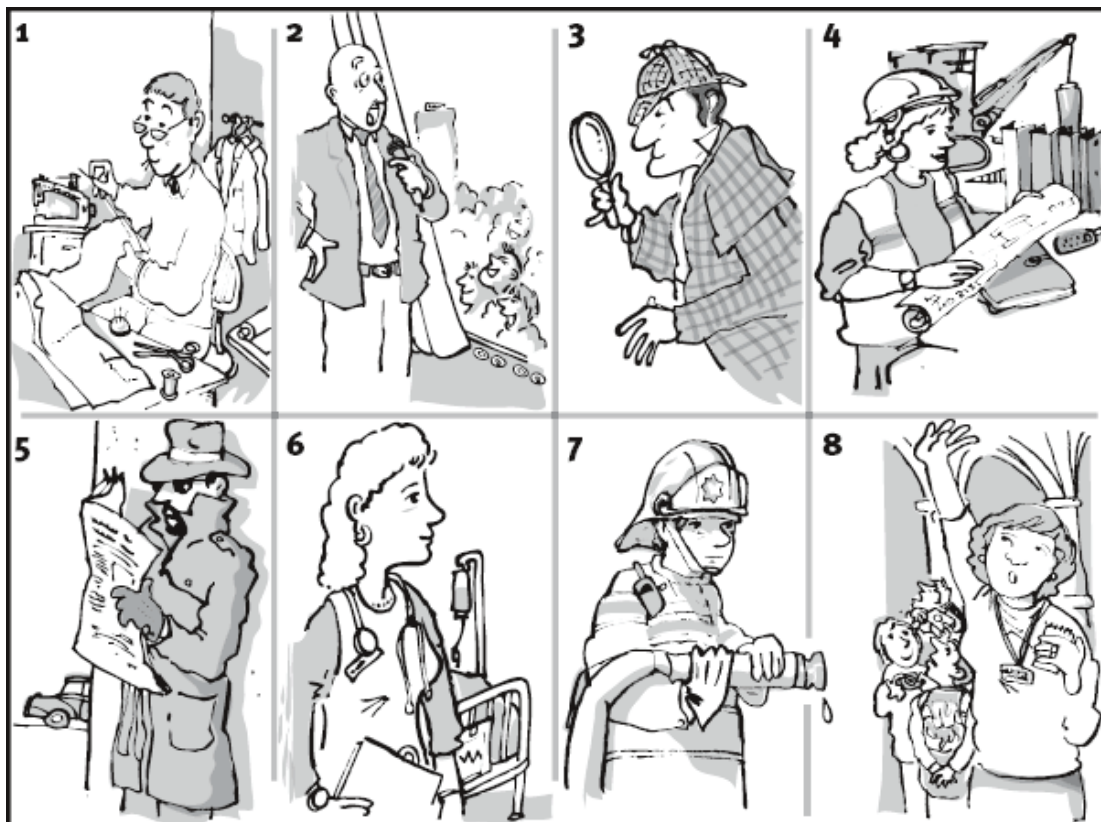


## Eight Metaphors for Teachers of Listening

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One hundred years ago language teachers, at least in the UK, wielded a big stick and recited grammar rules. Students covered from the former and rote-learned the latter. In some schools they still do. Since then, of course, most language teachers and teaching have been transformed according to developments in society. For example, the technological age forced teachers to understand the workings of cassette recorders and language laboratories. A more libertarian age ushered in the language teacher as facilitator, organiser and in some cases, psychotherapist. Indeed, the roles of the language teacher continue to change up to this day.

Many language students and teachers are (sometimes painfully) aware that knowing the target language does not make you a good teacher of it. There are numerous other factors involved in being good at the job, many of which are related to how well we play the roles mentioned above. In this article, we will look specifically at the roles of the English teacher while conducting a listening lesson.



The illustrations show eight jobs that have something in common with the language teacher engaged in teaching listening skills. How are these jobs related to the teacher's roles? Here are some suggestions:

(1) A tailor

The listening text must 'fit' the class just as a dress must fit its wearer. There are a number of factors which make a recording appropriate. These include the language level. If a passage is too simple, it may induce boredom; too difficult and the students will probably 'switch off'. Difficulties may lie in the speed at which the speakers talk, vocabulary, grammar structures, density, or the number of voices on the recording. Subject matter is another factor. Will the students be interested in the topic? Will they be motivated to listen? Is the topic culturally accessible?

(2) A stand-up comedian or a storyteller

The teacher is often the best source of input. Teachers know their students better than any materials writer. They can grade their language appropriately and react in real time to the students' responses. A teacher's anecdotes, stories, advice, and even classroom instructions can all form the basis of excellent roughly-tuned input (input that is not precisely targeted at the students' level but can be 'roughly' understood by them). For the more extended genres such as anecdotes, teachers who can 'hold' an audience have a valuable skill. Just remember the public speaker's maxim: make sure you've stopped speaking before the audience has stopped listening!

(3) A sleuth

Before class, teachers need to be able to analyse the language in a recording as closely as Sherlock Holmes analysed clues. These are the type of questions to ask: will my students understand this idiom? Can they deal with the variety of verb tenses here? Will they be able to decode all the contractions in this passage? Do they need to? Will they get the joke? A further aspect of this sleuthing includes actually listening to the passage before class. Do not rely on reading a transcript; transcripts tell us nothing of speed, accent or clarity.

(4) An engineer

When using recordings, the teacher needs a basic knowledge of the way in which the equipment works, and more pertinently, the way in which the equipment sometimes *doesn't* work. And if your engineering skills aren't great, and suddenly you find that the CD jumps, the cassette erupts in an explosion of mangled ribbon, or there's a power cut, be prepared to stay cool and read the transcript or improvise (by candlelight if necessary!). Low-tech solutions are sometimes the simplest.

(5) A spy

While the students are listening, the teacher should be watching their hands and faces. Are the students writing the answers? Do they look confused? Who is nodding intelligently? Why is this student looking at the wrong page? Listening is an internal process but, except with the most poker-faced of students, there are usually outward manifestations. By paying attention to these, teachers can become more sensitive to the students' moment-by-moment needs.

(6) A doctor

Teachers need to be experts at diagnosis. Where the students are having problems in listening, the teacher needs to ask, what is going wrong? Why? Is it the speed, the vocabulary, the accent, the topic, or the fact that it's Friday evening and the heating is on too high?

(7) A firefighter

If *everything* goes wrong and the listening passage is too difficult, the teacher needs to get everyone out of trouble, just as a firefighter might lead the way to safety. How? Here are some options: if using a coursebook, the class may be able to read the transcript while listening. This often clears up ambiguities. Another way is to break the passage down into smaller chunks, pausing after each sentence or two, and checking understanding. A third option is to encourage collaboration: get the students to share what they understood, write this on the board, and as a whole class, piece together the content before listening again.

(8) A tour guide

It sometimes pays to think of a piece of spoken language as an artefact for investigation. Teachers can point out what is interesting about it (a piece of spoken grammar, a bit of slang, a metaphor that also occurs in the students' mother tongue), and ignore everything that isn't. And, like good tour guides, we should make sure everybody is with us before moving on.

Which of these roles have you played while teaching listening? It is likely that, at one stage or another, language teachers will find themselves playing most - if not all - of them. Our mastery in the roles depends on how well-prepared we are. As the writer Denis Waitley once said, 'Expect the best, plan for the worst and prepare to be surprised'. And leave the big stick at home.

(adapted from an extract from Chapter 4 of *How to Teach Listening*, the new book in Pearson Longman's *How to ...* series)



