

Teaching English Online: What equipment and tech skills do I need?*



*Not as much as you probably imagine!

Two of the most frequently asked questions I receive from people who are thinking about teaching English online are:

- Is the tech setup complicated?
- Do I need a lot of tech skills?

The answer to each question is a simple “No.”

Now, when I began teaching online in early 2012, from a small town in Brazil, things were considerably more complicated. I had to troubleshoot issues frequently.

But fast-forwarding to today, life is much easier.



That's me poolside in Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil

There are many reasons that it's easier than ever before to teach online:

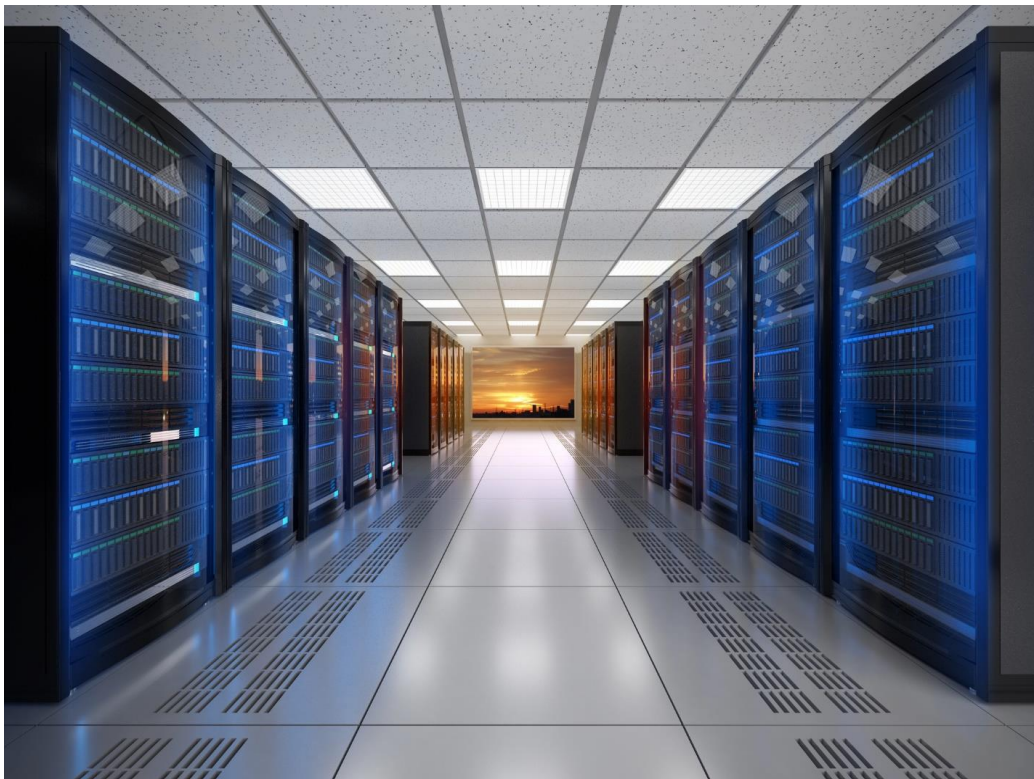
- Around the world, internet (or Internet, with a capital I, if you insist) speeds and reliability have improved dramatically.

- There are also more ways to connect to the internet, such as cable, wifi, using your cell phone as a hot spot, and more. This means you can teach from more places than ever before.
- There are more videoconferencing platforms (e.g., Skype, Zoom, Google Meet) than ever before, and these are more stable than the old VOIP software (meaning less troubleshooting is needed).
- These various platforms have come to offer basically the same features, so knowledge of one carries over to another.
- The general level of technical knowledge has increased – in some part due to the COVID pandemic, which forced many people to become more tech-savvy, like it or not.

But let's cut to the chase: What IS required to teach English online?

Let's address the tech setup (hardware and software) considerations first, then the skills.

If you already have a computer, whether it is a desktop or laptop, it will probably be sufficient for teaching online. Contrary to what some folks imagine, little memory or processing power is required. You won't be rendering videos or computing moonshot trajectories. You won't need a Cray supercomputer or racks of servers.



How to Teach English Online

<https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=61563552000741>

What I tell folks is this: If you regularly watch videos via a streaming service like Netflix or Hulu, your computer and internet speed are probably sufficient. But it's easy enough to test by arranging an online video chat with a friend. Call your friend using Google Meet or Zoom, and if you can chat online, you can hold classes.

OK, but what about tablets? Or cell phones?

Although these devices can certainly serve as backups if necessary, I'm not a big fan of using them on a regular basis. The reason is simply that I like a screen large enough to display two windows, with my student to the left, and the lesson material (whether a PDF, online article, or whatever) open on the right.

Yes, if all of your classes are just conversation classes, you could manage with a tablet or cell phone. But I believe that you'll soon find yourself wanting a larger screen.

Let's now turn our attention to skills. What do you need?

Honestly, you aren't likely to need troubleshooting skills beyond the ones that you already have. If there is a storm and your power is disrupted, and you now have no internet connection, what do you do?

Likely you'll turn off your router, modem, and computer, count to 15-Mississippi, and restart everything.

I would keep the customer service number for my ISP (that's "internet service provider", like Verizon, Spectrum, or Cox) handy in case I need to call them about a protracted outage. And if you have a contract with Best Buys' Geek Squad or a local tech shop, keep that phone number handy, too.

But odds are, you won't need them.

You'll also need to learn your way around videoconferencing software. When I started out teaching online, back when FDR was president, the *de facto* standard for teleconferencing (same as videoconferencing) was Skype. Then during the pandemic, Zoom leapfrogged Skype to become the most popular platform.

But my favorite platform these days is Google Meet. Now, let me preface by saying that Google Meet, Skype, and Zoom all have essentially the same features, just with the buttons in different places. So why is Google Meet my choice?

First, not nearly as many folks use Skype as they used to. Also, sometimes it can be difficult initially to find a person on Skype to connect with them – although once you do, there typically will not be any ongoing issues.

And why not Zoom, which skyrocketed in popularity in 2020-2021? Zoom wants you to schedule classes as recurring meetings in advance, and rescheduling is a bit of a pain. Also, in 2023, Zoom

began requiring users to have a paid account to host sessions of more than 40 minutes. As many of your classes are likely to be 60 minutes long, you'll need to subscribe. The subscription fee for a basic account is only about US\$16 per month, but why pay it if you don't need to?

By contrast, Google Meet is ridiculously easy to use. You don't have to look up and locate your student in a directory, as in Skype. There is no scheduling required, so rescheduling concerns. It takes, literally, about 10 seconds to launch a meeting. And Google Meet is 100% free. The only consideration is that both you and your student must have a Google Account of some sort. If you both have Gmail accounts, that's all you need.

Regardless of the teleconferencing platform you use, you'll need to learn a few basic functions. These include:

- Launching a meeting (obviously)
- How to use the messaging function, to spell a word or send a link
- How to share a screen
- Perhaps how to record a session for replay later
- Not a whole lot else

So we've addressed the tech setup required, and the skills you'll need.

"Is that it?" you may be asking. Well, pretty much. Sure, sometimes there are tech glitches, and I may even have to reschedule a class. But really, there is absolutely no reason that tech will stop you from teaching English online.

So don't let the FEAR of tech stop you.

Do you still have questions? You can email me at: john@howtoteachenglishonline.net. I promise to reply. No AI chatbot, no VA in India. Me.