

Focus on

TEACHING ONLINE

1. What is it?

Good teaching is good teaching, whether it is done face-to-face or online. As a teacher, you will already have many skills and strategies that you can bring to teaching online, whatever digital tools you choose (or are asked) to use. And as a language teacher, you already know how to engage and motivate your students. You also know that you need to give your students opportunities to listen to and practise English. In this paper, we look at tools, techniques, and activities that will enable you to use these essential skills in your online teaching.

Variety of options

There isn't a single 'correct' way to teach online. How you teach online depends on your context and what technologies you and your students have available. It also depends on how confident you feel using these technologies, and what you want your students to achieve. Teaching online can include:

■ Synchronous learning

This involves communicating in real time. For example, carrying out a live lesson with your students using a videoconferencing tool like [Skype](#) or [Zoom](#).

■ Asynchronous learning

This involves communicating over time. For example, asking your students to work with online learning materials or participate in a class discussion via email or in an online forum at a time or location of their own choosing.

■ Using ready-made materials

A wide range of digital English language learning materials for all age groups and on almost any topic is available online, including language learning apps, digital reading and listening resources, grammar games, and videos. Many English language coursebooks come with online tips and activities for teachers and parents, including those that can be found on the [Oxford Teachers' Club](#) and [Oxford Parents](#) websites.

■ Creating materials

You may need to create some materials yourself in order to supplement your coursebook or to meet the requirements of teaching online. For example, you could create online quizzes using free websites and apps like [Kahoot!](#) or [Quizlet](#).

■ Using multimedia

Multimedia can be used in low-tech contexts, where you can create audio recordings to share via email, as well as in high-tech contexts, where you could create a video recording or a narrated PowerPoint presentation to share via an online file-sharing service such as [Google Drive](#) or [Dropbox](#).

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■ Recording video lessons

Video-record yourself teaching a lesson as if you were teaching face-to-face. For example, you could teach to your phone camera, using a piece of paper to make notes and showing the paper to the camera when relevant. Include a follow-up task so that your students have a reason to watch your video lessons, and share the video recording with your students by uploading it to a file-sharing service like **Google Drive** or **Dropbox**.

■ Using an LMS or learning platform

With a learning management system (LMS), you can upload resources for your students, carry out forum discussions, and create quizzes, assignments, and tests, depending on the platform. The advantage of an LMS is that the grades for your students' activities are stored in a gradebook on the platform itself. This can make it easier for you to monitor and provide feedback on students' work than when tasks are submitted via multiple channels. Some schools already have an institutional LMS. If not, you could choose to use a free learning platform like **Edmodo** or **Google Classroom** to keep your classes in one common online space that everyone can access from home.

There are many ways you can teach online. To add interest to your lessons and to motivate your students, try to use a variety of asynchronous and synchronous approaches and a variety of tools and activity types. However, the key is to choose the approaches and tools that best suit you, your students, and your context.

2. What are the challenges?

Confidence

As a teacher, you may feel unprepared for online teaching, especially if you have never had the opportunity to teach online before. You may feel a lack of confidence, which is entirely normal. Here are some ways you can increase your confidence.

■ Setting expectations

Communicate with your students about what to expect from moving into a fully online learning mode. You can do this by email (i.e. asynchronously) or in a videoconferencing session with the class (i.e. synchronously). First, find out what digital technologies they have access to and are most familiar with. Based on this, discuss with your students what will be possible and what will not be possible online.

■ Starting small

Your students may already regularly use email and social networking apps such as **WhatsApp** or **Facebook**. They may also be using certain language learning apps. Start by sharing learning content using the digital technologies that you and your students are already familiar and comfortable with.

■ Building up

Once you have gained confidence in teaching online, and assuming you and your students have access to other technologies, you can start to experiment with other approaches, such as live online classes via videoconferencing, or setting up a platform for your students on **Edmodo** or **Google Classroom**. Teach yourself how to do this by searching online for tutorials, of which there are many.



Low-tech contexts

Not all teachers or students have access to a limitless range of digital technologies. In some contexts, bandwidth may be an issue or internet access may be expensive. Students may not have laptops or smartphones. However, if your students have simple mobile phones, they are likely to have access to email, and they should also be able to create audio recordings. Section 3 includes some ideas of how you can use these tools with your students.

Work versus personal time

Moving to online teaching can make it difficult to separate work time from personal time. Your students may expect you to be available at all hours to deal with their online work or to respond to their queries. To ensure a reasonable work–life balance, set defined ‘office hours’ – for example, 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. Monday to Friday – and let your students know that you will not be answering emails (or chat messages, video calls, etc.) outside of these hours. Handling your students’ expectations about your availability is key to ensuring that both you and your students understand exactly what your online work commitments are.

If you are teaching live online from home, it can be challenging to find a quiet place away from everyone in which to run your online class. To help with this, have set times every day or week when you hold your videoconferencing classes, so that the people you live with know when they will need to keep relatively quiet. Try to set up a workspace in a quiet corner or in a separate room at home and use this space for all your online work. It will help you physically separate your online work life from your personal life.

3. How can this be implemented?

Although teaching online is different from teaching face-to-face, you can still create effective communicative – and even multisensory – activities for your students. Let’s see how.

Low-tech contexts

In low-tech contexts, use the tools that you know your students have access to. Even with just email and audio recordings, there are plenty of ways that you can work with your students. Here are some examples.

■ Email story chain

Write the first paragraph of an interesting story, at an appropriate level for your students, to send in an email to them. Each student in turn adds to the story, creating a longer and longer story which is completed once the final student has returned it to you. Write an email explaining the activity, setting the word count per contribution and providing a numbered list of class members and their email addresses. Once the story chain has been completed, share the completed story with your students via email, inviting them to send you corrections and/or queries on the language used, and then share a final version of the story.

■ ‘About me’ audio recording

Choose a topic like your hobbies, your plans for the future, or a past event in your life and create an audio recording about it, using your phone or computer. Share the recording with your students (for example, as an email attachment or by putting it online on [Google Drive](#) or [Dropbox](#) and sharing the link to your recording via email). Ask your students to listen to the recording and to send you two or three questions about it by email. Respond to your students’ questions in a new audio recording. Then ask your students to create and share their own audio recordings on the same topic, using your recording as a model.



Activities for adult and secondary learners

There are various ways you can work online with older learners to present language and provide opportunities for practising language and developing study and presentation skills. For example, you can change a reading activity into a listening activity by recording a text on your phone to send to your students, and you can ask them to use audio recordings instead of writing for practice in speaking.

You can produce language learning resources for your students and find resources online – and so can your students. Your older students are capable of producing and sharing learning content, so take advantage of this. Your role in this case is to facilitate the production of resources and content by your students (for example, by giving them models), and to provide feedback and corrections on the work they produce.

■ Self-study: sharing language learning apps

Use email to ask your students to share their favourite language learning apps or websites. Then compile a list of these and share it with your learners, asking them to try out one new website or app for a week. They then report back to the class on what they tried out and whether they found it useful or not. Do this over several weeks. Involving your students in sharing and evaluating online resources encourages autonomous learning and introduces them to a broader range of useful tools for learning.

■ Model answers

Create a short text that is suitable for your students. In an email, write some comprehension questions about the text and share these and the text with your students. They return their answers via email and you can then share your own model answers (via email), asking your students to check and correct their answers to send to you again. This makes correcting more manageable for you and gives your students the opportunity to revise and correct their work before submitting it again.

■ News report

Create a news report summarizing important international, national, or local news for the week and share it with your students via email. You can then nominate one student per week to produce a weekly news bulletin to share with the class, based on your model. This activity is suitable for intermediate- to advanced-level students.

■ Sharing presentations

Create a PowerPoint or [Google Slides](#) presentation for your students on a language point they have recently studied. Share it with your students via email or upload it to [Google Drive](#) or [Dropbox](#) for your students to access. Ask your students to find examples of the language point and to prepare a short presentation about them for the class. Then share the students' presentations in synchronous videoconferencing sessions, if possible, with students presenting their own slides. Alternatively, the presentations can be shared via email.

■ Staying in touch

Use a closed social networking group (for example, on [Kik](#), [WhatsApp](#), or [Facebook](#)) to stay in touch, share links or news, and to discuss issues as a class.

Activities for pre-primary and younger learners

Many teachers share digital resources such as games and apps for their younger learners to use at home with parents as part of teaching online. In addition, if you can hold live videoconferencing classes with your younger primary-level students, you can do some of the activities that you use in your face-to-face classes. A parent or caregiver should be present, and the live class should be kept short, between 15 and 30 minutes. Generally, the younger the learners, the shorter the live class should be. Activities should be short, fun, and engaging, and led by the teacher. Here are some ideas.

■ Story time

Read a storybook to the class, showing the pictures to the camera. Get students to join in any story chants, and ask questions about the characters, as you would in a face-to-face classroom.

■ Movement

Play simple games like 'Simon says', or sing action songs like 'Head, shoulders, knees, and toes'.

■ Drawing

Play picture dictation (i.e. dictate what children need to draw) and ask the students to share their completed drawings via the camera.

■ Songs

Teach your students new songs and sing them together as a group.

■ Show and tell

Ask very young students to fetch and show their favourite toy to the class, and ask older primary students to show what they have been working on at home.

■ Scavenger hunt

Revise simple vocabulary by asking children to fetch an object and show it to the camera. Choose vocabulary sets that children are likely to have in the house, such as clothes, food items, stationery, and toys.

4. Over to you

More resources for online teaching are available now than ever before. Even if you have never taught online, there is plenty of material, training, and support available to help you develop your teaching skills and learn new ones. You can start teaching online by trying out some of the ideas presented in this paper. The more you teach online, the more confident you will feel and the better you will get at it.

5. Further reading

The 10 fundamentals of teaching online

https://teachonline.ca/sites/default/files/pdfs/the_10_fundamentals_of_teaching_online_for_faculty_and_instructors_-_september_2016.pdf

Advice to those about to teach online

<https://www.tonybates.ca/2020/03/09/advice-to-those-about-to-teach-online-because-of-the-corona-virus/>

7 tips on how to prepare for teaching online

<https://elearningindustry.com/7-tips-prepare-for-teaching-online>

6 tips for moving your teaching online

<https://www.oxfordtefl.com/blog/moving-your-teaching-online-how-do-you-adapt-your-teaching-techniques-for-the-virtual-classroom>

Teaching online (webinar recordings)

<https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/news-events/webinars>

10 tips for effective online discussions

<https://er.educause.edu/blogs/2018/11/10-tips-for-effective-online-discussions>

5 ways to enhance your social presence in online courses

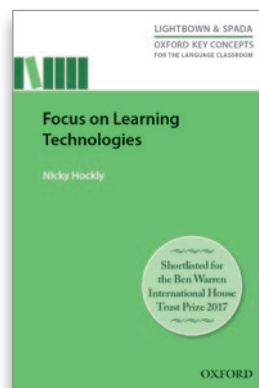
<http://www.emoderationskills.com/5-ways-to-enhance-your-social-presence-in-online-courses/>

How to choose a videoconferencing platform

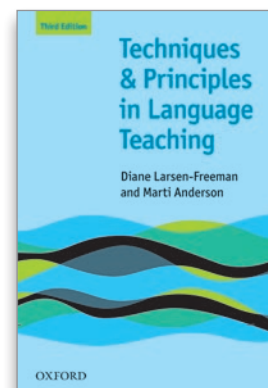
<https://youtu.be/-1t0Fi2vZ38>

Talking points

- Are you and your students in a low-tech, medium-tech, or high-tech context? What digital tools can you use to teach your students online, keeping in mind your technology context?
- What coursebook activities can you carry out online with your students? How?
- What ready-made online language learning resources can you share with your students? How can you ensure that they try out these resources?
- What synchronous and asynchronous online activities can you do with your students?
- Can you use social networking apps (for example, **WhatsApp**, **Kik**, or **Facebook**) to stay in touch with your students? What do you need to keep in mind if you use these tools?
- How can you provide feedback and correction on your students' online work?



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