



TESOL Connections

Keeping English language professionals connected

Growing an ELT Side Hustle: The Power of Online Tools

by [Kallie-Jo Ho](#) and [Valerie Abbott](#)



Many of us need a side hustle to bring in some extra cash. This has been especially true given the challenges of the ESL/EFL job markets. We're Kallie-Jo Ho and Val Abbott, a couple of teachers with side hustles in which we have been able to apply our MATESL expertise.

Kallie-Jo has started an online tutoring business with an audience primarily in Vietnam. Because of time constraints with family and other jobs, she has only

taken on a couple clients at a time. However, she hopes to expand her business as she has more time to focus on it in the coming months. Opening up her business to asynchronous sessions will allow her to expand her client base and give her more opportunity to reach more people.

Val established a freelance editing and writing business, working with clients online. Each month Val usually has three to four projects, which equates to approximately 15–20 hours per month. Val's client base ranges from a group of Brazilian academics who author journal articles to a native Thai speaker who owns restaurants. She was able to double the gross income of her business in its second year thanks to her accountability group and networking.

We presented at the 2018 TESOL Convention in Chicago, Illinois to an eager audience of fellow educators. Nearly 100 attendees came together in their search for tips on starting a successful side hustle. They learned how to brainstorm freelance business ideas, how to build a business brand, and how technology can be utilized to bolster the success of a side hustle.

Here are some insights and lessons learned as we've grown our businesses.

3 Tips to Get Started: Lessons Learned From Kallie-Jo

I have found that establishing a business can be daunting without the right mindset and motivation. The following tips are critical for a successful start.

1. Clarify Your Vision and Scope

When brainstorming what side hustle to pursue, considering what you enjoy, as well as your unique qualifications, is key. For example, I've really enjoyed one-to-one and small group tutoring in the past, and I've taken a few classes about online education. I wanted to use those skills to start an online community of learners.

I have also learned the importance of keeping things simple. One challenge I encountered was having too many ideas at once. At first, I thought I could start a YouTube channel in addition to an asynchronous online class. I planned to then use those videos to advertise synchronous online classes. This became too much for the start of my business. I realized that I needed to pick one focus area. My stronger area was individual tutoring, so I decided to start there.



“ I have learned the importance of keeping things simple. ”

Finally, don't limit yourself to your own tech abilities. If you have an idea but aren't sure how to implement it, there are always people (even other teachers) available to help you learn more about what technology can do and how you can implement it!

2. Know Your Audience

Another key element in starting your side hustle is thinking about your target audience. Having too narrow or broad of a reach can result in frustration and potential financial challenges for your business. As you think about your audience, it is helpful to design a needs analysis and distribute it to an array of people. I conducted a needs analysis through a Facebook group. I added personal connections and then asked them to add their friends. I used that platform to take polls and ask open-ended questions. This provided valuable insight that shaped how I approached my business endeavor. Questions I asked included:

- How much time do you spend speaking (writing) English?
- What kinds of English classes have you taken?
- Why do you study English?

Utilizing social media can keep marketing costs low as you try to build your brand. What social media does your audience use? Be mindful of the social media available to your audience. For

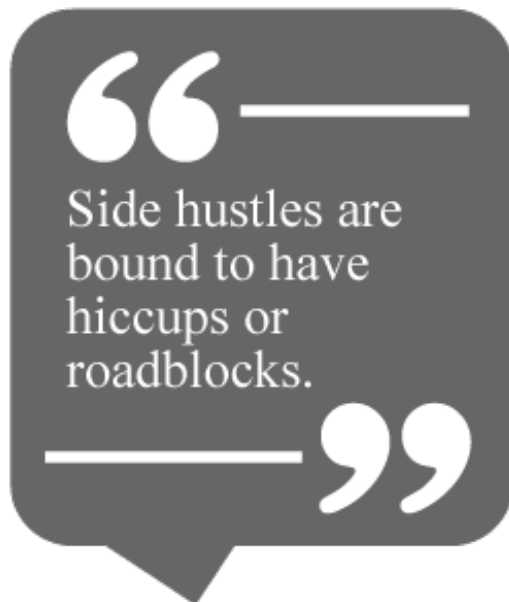
instance, it wouldn't be wise to advertise your product or service to a Chinese audience on Facebook because Facebook is not readily available in China.

3. Set Goals and Get Organized

Once you've decided on your product and your audience, it's time to get started! This can be the most challenging part, so it's important to set clear, obtainable goals. Maybe that means developing a timeline, firm deadlines, or milestones—it depends on your organization style. Some helpful apps for goal setting and getting started include [Google Calendar](#), [AirTable](#), [Trello](#), [Now Then Time Tracking Pro](#) for iOS, and [Microsoft Planner](#).

You can gain momentum at the start by using the tools you already know. I began by creating fun activities and polls for my pilot Facebook group. Whenever I get discouraged about business logistics, I plan a couple of activities for that group to test out. The interaction energizes me and encourages me to continue.

Finally, accountability is vital in this stage, especially if you are working alone on your side hustle. This can come in the form of others working on a similar side hustle or in a similar market. In some cases, family and friends can also be helpful. Accountability is an area Val will explore further.



Keeping Yourself Accountable: Val's Online Network

Side hustles are bound to have hiccups or roadblocks. Having an accountability group has helped me overcome those challenges and grow into a successful freelance editor. Before I formalized an accountability group, I joined two professional editing organizations and scoured Facebook pages and groups. There, I found a fellow editor with a similar background—a former teacher turned freelance editor. A handful of email correspondences led to an online Zoom meeting with my new editing colleague, Katie. We spent 2 hours discussing tips and tricks regarding work efficiency, networking, attracting new clients, and training.

A few weeks passed before Katie and I decided to establish an accountability group. We each invited one other editor to join us in monthly meetings. Each group member brought unique qualities and experiences, enriching our editor network. All of us are current or former teachers who specialize in different areas of editing and writing. We quickly discovered the strength of forming a collective knowledge. One member has expertise with nonfiction book editing, another with fiction writing and editing, and two of us with technical and academic editing experience. Although there are many similarities in our business practices, we discuss and borrow techniques

from other specialties to make us stronger editors and businesswomen. Additionally, we pass around projects if or when we get requests that better align with another's strengths.

Here are some things we have done to help with accountability and supporting each other.

- **Set yearly and monthly goals.** We have a shared spreadsheet (thanks, [Google Sheets](#)) where we all list our yearly and monthly goals. For each month, we list wins, challenges/problems, goals, and action steps.
- **Maintain a shared folder.** Speaking of that goals spreadsheet, it lives in a Google Drive folder (thanks, [Google Drive](#)) where we share other files, too. We have folders for resources and business efficiency tools to expand our knowledge and improve our productivity.
- **Hold monthly meetings.** Our group meets once each month for about 2 hours. For video conference calls, we use a free platform called [Zoom](#) (yay free platforms!). We discuss our progress on the previous month's goals and plan for the month ahead.
- **Set up a private Facebook group.** There are always things that come up between our monthly meetings. Our private Facebook group is a good way for us to connect with each other for venting, soliciting help, and celebrating wins.

Overall, the sense of camaraderie has been immensely helpful for my freelancing endeavor. It's nice to establish a close-knit group—we encourage each other after failures and celebrate our successes. After all, many of us are facing the same challenges, so we may as well enrich each other's journey.

***Kallie-Jo Ho** is an ESL teacher in an adult education program in Urbana, Illinois. She generally works several part-time teaching jobs to create a full-time teaching schedule. Her current side hustle is online synchronous tutoring groups with college students in Vietnam, and she hopes to expand her business to reach professionals.*

***Valerie Abbott** is a former ESL teacher who now works in higher education administration. She has established her own freelancing business, Writing Help KC, to support individuals with their writing and editing needs. Her MATESL knowledge has been helpful in establishing her credibility as a language guru and in attracting nonnative English speakers as clients. Check out her website, www.writinghelpkc.com.*