

ADAPTING TO AND DELIVERING REMOTE INSTRUCTION: INTERVIEW WITH PROF. SUSAN GAER

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Susan Gaer is a Professor Emeritus of Santa Ana College, California. She has an MA in English with emphasis on Teaching English as a Second Language and an MA in Educational Technology from Pepperdine University. She is the President-Elect CATESOL 2018-2020. She is also a Google Certified Innovator, Kahoot Ambassador, Thinglink Educator and Quizlet Teacher Educator. Prof. Gaer has developed a web page <https://www.susangaer.com/> that helps teachers to engage students with technology. In this interview, Prof. Gaer shared her viewpoints and some examples on remote instruction.

- 1. Good day, Prof. Gaer. I would like to thank you for this great opportunity to interview you. First of all, would you please tell us a little bit about how you started your interest in technology integration and its potential for supporting English language learners?**

Hi, Flora. Thank you for having me. I got started in technology when I was working with literacy level students that had immigrated to the United States from Southeast Asia in the early 1980s. These students did not have a written language and had a lot of trauma from war. I found that traditional education did not engage them. I was also living in a very small town at the time in Central California. I was feeling isolated and my students were feeling shell shocked. So I found a small grant that allowed me to buy a computer, get America Online software (AOL) and an internet connection. I taught my students how to get online, and even found a guest speaker that came and talked to us every Monday about her Sunday brunch experience. Although my students had no written language they were very kinesthetic. Using technology came natural to them once they learned the steps to connect. I can remember being at a technology conference in Sacramento and my students called me on AOL because the teacher couldn't find the textbook. This happened in the middle of a presentation, and it just showed that you can engage students more when you use technology. For me that is how it all started in the 1980s. My first website was a technology project website. I had students from around the world submitting projects. Now that I am retired, I have decided to help teachers with their students, so my website has switched focus.

- 2. On your website and social media, you have shared many ideas including lesson plans that help teachers around the world (yes, including me) to bring technology into their classrooms. That's very kind of you. What inspired you to share these resources?**

I have always been a sharer of resources. I understood the value of networking when the internet was a text driven system. So once I retired, I decided that I would share as many lessons as possible with other teachers and help them to integrate technology into their classroom.

3. Are you now working on another book or another project? What's coming up next for you?

Right now my focus is on CATESOL (California Association of Teachers of other Languages). I am working hard to create affordable Professional Development for teachers. In addition, I continue making OER (Open Education Resources) for teachers to use with students.

4. Prof. Gaer, concerns over the transmission of COVID-19 are closing schools and universities across the globe. Millions of students and teachers are unable to physically attend their class meetings; and they are somehow forced to 'move online'. In your opinion, can remote teaching provide the same benefits as face-to-face lectures?

I believe it can. In fact, I believe that remote learning can provide more opportunities for more diverse learning. No longer are we stuck in the four walls of a classroom we can learn with students from all over the world. This is a great opportunity for us to finally make substantive changes to how we teach and learn.

5. What key adjustments should teachers make to content and pedagogy when they design and/or deliver a remote course?

So in the ideal world, learning can be done anywhere anytime. Some of the adjustments that teachers need to learn to make are that they need to be very clear about what their goals and objectives are. When I am teaching students online, I always have a video of what I want the students to do. I model this and take them step-by-step through the process. I give them a model for each step of the way and a model for that final product. I don't believe much in the testing system that many schools use, I prefer that students show me their learning via a final project. Another extremely important point is that teachers must connect to their students. The connection needs to be more concrete than in the face-to-face classroom. Teachers need to learn who their students are to be able to connect with them. It makes me very sad when I see teachers that just put up their content and tell the students they have to be finished with certain content by Friday. Where is the connection in that? Lessons need to be designed in ways that are meaningful to the students. This

can be different for every student. So it takes a skillful teacher to connect with each student to understand what is appropriate learning for that person.

6. Assessing student learning online can be challenging, especially in courses that were designed to be taught in-person. What are the best practices for assessing student learning in remote classes?

I'm not a fan of traditional testing. I myself struggle when I take a test. I do not often learn anything from taking a test. I learn best when I discuss the information with people. A test works for me if I have a discussion about the answers. This way my group and I analyze all the answers to pick the best ones. I learn much more from the discussion than I do from the actual test. For these reasons, testing is not on my top list of ways to assess students. I often use Google forms to make formative assessments. Summative assessments for me are always done via a project demonstrating the learning.

7. Do you have any examples of formative assessments that you can share with us?

Yes, please feel free to take a look at some samples of my formative assessments:

- KDM Chart — (Know, Don't know, May Know):
<https://bit.ly/342A51z>
- Vocabulary Review: <https://bit.ly/2Gcqi0V>
- Pre Reading Reflection: <https://bit.ly/3mVZNxC>
- After Class Reflection: <https://bit.ly/2EB4NGt>

8. And to assess their learning, you prefer to have students work on a final project?

Yes. Here are some of my students' final projects that might give you an idea.

- International Cookbook: <https://bit.ly/2G24qFH>
- Our Jobs: <https://bit.ly/2S11dIT>
- Student Bios: <https://bit.ly/3j7sNQH>
- Cellphone Stories: <https://bit.ly/2RZJBgi>
- Favorite Clothes: <https://bit.ly/3cx41qu>
- Hairs: <https://bit.ly/3n2CnXx>

- 9. Interesting. Thank you very much for sharing these samples. These certainly will give us some ideas. Now I am wondering. How do you give feedback for your students? Do you have any practical tips for delivering appropriate feedback in an online environment?**

Just like feedback in the face-to-face environment, the best way for teachers to give appropriate feedback is one-on-one with students. I suggest using some of your online class time with appointments. This way you could meet with students individually or in small groups to give them feedback based on their work.

- 10. Prof. Gaer, one of the challenges of remote teaching is to sustain learner motivation, engagement, and interactivity throughout the course. How should teachers motivate learners and sustain their interests in a remote class? How to make students active in a virtual learning environment?**

The best way to engage learners is by connecting with them and letting them take charge of their own learning. In the EFL context, letting students choose their own reading based on their interests and passions. Use those readings, and have them write summaries, book reviews, etc., based on what they read. I believe if you can find what a student is interested in, they will be motivated and engaged to learn.

- 11. There are some people who believe that remote teaching can never replace the face-to-face model because they believe that students need schools in order to succeed and develop their academic and interpersonal skills for life. How would you answer this point of view?**

I believe there is a place for everything. Previous to the COVID-19 pandemic, e-learning was not adopted by most teachers. During the pandemic, everyone has been forced online. This is not necessarily good either. I think the combination of face-to-face and online learning (or blended-learning) might be the answer. Actually, I always thought this. I do not believe that only face-to-face instruction is required for learning. To me the best learning is the learning the students want to do. If the students do not want to do it, they will not learn. They may be able to regurgitate facts, but that is not what I call learning.

- 12. Right. Yes, it is true that during the COVID-19 pandemic, e-learning has been adopted by the majority of countries around the world as a solution to continue teaching/learning. Do you think this will shift our educational system in the future?**

I certainly hope that this pandemic will change learning. As I said earlier, this shift in education was what I have been waiting for all my life. I truly believe that with a combination of face-to-face and online learning, we can create a more educated society that is not only educated in reading and writing; but also, a society that is both digitally literate with global citizens, and integrated with the world as a whole. This cannot be done face to face. This cannot be done within the four walls of a classroom. To be a better global citizen, be more digitally literate and to be integrated with the world as a whole only happens when you're connected with others online.

- 13. Thank you so much for sharing some insightful ideas with us, Prof. Gaer. As a closing remark for this interview, would you please give three pieces of advice to teachers working remotely with English language learners?**

Be empathetic, teach digital literacy skills, and connect with your learners.

- 14. Again, thank you very much, Prof. Gaer. I hope that our journal readers will take the ideas presented here and use them to help their students in learning English.**

Thank you, Flora and the TEFLIN journal for inviting me. Please visit my website <https://www.susangaer.com/>. I enjoy sharing and exchanging ideas with teachers and other ELT professionals.