

## GTIP Think Piece – Developing pupils' writing through geography (Graham Butt)

*In this Think Piece Graham Butt, Senior Lecturer in Geography Education and Director of Academic Planning at the School of Education, University of Birmingham, explores ways in which developing children's writing skills can help to promote their geographical knowledge and understanding.*

### Menu

- Introduction, p1
- Key concepts and questions, p1
- Literacy, language and Learning, p1
- Ideas and activities for PGCE sessions, p3
- Encouraging extended writing, p3
- Conclusion, p3
- Bibliography, p3

### Introduction

This Think Piece is particularly concerned with how we might help PGCE students develop their pupils' writing skills, through geography. We know that different forms of communication help to accelerate the development of thought and understanding, for we all 'talk, read and write to learn'. Social constructivist theories of learning suggest that children learn best in social situations, where their use of language is central in the process of acquiring new concepts. Therefore, within the context of geography teaching, the use of language and development of literacy are central to our pupils' ability to cope with increasing cognitive demands, the creation of new understanding, and the ordering of thoughts.

### Key concepts

- effective communication in the classroom is fundamental to teaching and learning
- developing literacy skills is essential to developing thought and understanding; we 'talk, read and write to learn'
- talking, reading and listening are precursors to successful writing in geography
- using language is essential for communicating what we know and understand, but is also fundamental to the whole process of learning

### Key questions

- What are the links between language, literacy and learning geography?
- How can the development of literacy skills help children enhance their learning of geography?
- What techniques can be used in geography lessons to develop children's writing about geography?
- To what extent can the development of literacy strategies help pupils to think more critically and engage more fully with learning geography?

### Literacy, language and learning

There is considerable evidence that standards of literacy in the UK population are low compared to other OECD nations. Despite the fact that the possession of literacy skills is essential in any modern, communications-led society, there are substantial numbers of both adults and children (particularly boys) who remain functionally illiterate. However, the development of literacy across the curriculum

in schools has been promoted since the launch of the National Literacy Strategies (NLS) in 1997 (Key Stages 1 and 2) and 2001 (Key Stage 3). The NLS provides guidance for the planning, teaching and assessment of literacy, as well as the development of writing styles (both fictional and non fictional), and for spelling and the use of vocabulary in different subjects. It also advises on active reading and listening, and the assessment of literacy skills. By increasing pupils' literacy in all subjects, including geography, they are further empowered to learn independently and improve their self motivation, behaviour and esteem.

It is important to appreciate the significance of both language and literacy in the development of geographical thinking. As Christine Counsell (2000) asserts 'A subject, or discipline, is a way of working with certain kinds of information in order to answer certain kinds of questions. A subject is not "information"; it is knowledge'. We should therefore strive to understand the links between language, literacy and knowledge creation in geography as a precursor to promoting effective geography education.

The ways in which geographers choose to structure knowledge within their subject discipline connects strongly to the language we use, the questions we pose, and the issues we seek to address. We have developed a subject-based literacy in order to use specific language (geographical terms, words, texts) to answer questions – subject-based literacy therefore arises from the regular use of language in posing and answering questions. Hence literacy acts as a vehicle to develop subject knowledge and understanding. However, we must be cautious. Geography, like any subject discipline, has a very specific language and we should use the particular forms of language and literacy best suited to posing and answering geographical questions. Simply bolting on generic, cross curricular, 'literacy strategies' may not always promote geographical understanding – such strategies need to appreciate the language, concepts, structures and aims of the subject to ensure that geographical thinking and understanding are advanced. Therefore, if not sensitively applied, literacy strategies – such as using writing frames, card sorts, DARTs, etc – may only marginally improve children's understanding of the subject.

Learning geography is not simply about amassing more facts, gaining more information and writing more convincingly (although these can be elements of the learning process); it is about achieving a fuller understanding of geographical concepts and ideas. It is also about developing the intellectual structures within which young people can understand and process geographical information. Part of this involves using geographical language in conceptually secure ways – a process helped by the development of subject-based literacy.

Geography teachers should not be solely concerned with correcting common mistakes that pupils make in their writing (with respect to grammar, punctuation, spelling, etc) - important though this obviously is. Teachers must understand the centrality of effective communication in geography - through speaking, writing, reading and listening – to the development of their pupils' thinking. Increasing the literacy of children through the study of geography will enable them to 'think better', helping them to structure their thoughts, reason their arguments and present information in more creative ways.

We should also aim to support pupils not only in their regular transactional writing, which involves conveying information and structuring arguments, but also in developing exploratory and personal forms of writing. It is these personal and expressive forms of language which more clearly reveal what pupils feel, believe and think. Pupils therefore need opportunities to use such forms of language - perhaps in the form of writing a diary, a letter, a conversation, a piece of descriptive writing about their feelings at a particular event - to help develop and reveal their geographical thoughts. Transactional writing may not always do this. This implies that we should help pupils to

write in ways that challenge, entertain and persuade; as well as in ways that inform, analyse and explain.

Developing pupils' literacy skills through learning geography is not simply about helping them write better (or talk better, or read better, or listen better). It is not primarily about using geography to promote the development of generic skills - it is about realising the importance of promoting both geographical language and literacy, which when combined help to develop geographical thinking.

### **Ideas and activities for PGCE sessions**

It is helpful to both 'model' and discuss techniques mentioned in these activities for geography PGCE sessions. By playing the role of the learner who is attempting these tasks, PGCE students gain an appreciation of the ways in which such activities can be structured, introduced, supported and assessed.

These literacy techniques recognise that many pupils find writing 'hard work', both physically and intellectually:

1. Considering different genres of writing and writing for an 'audience'
2. Evaluating pupils' writing
3. Examining the writing tasks in textbooks and examination papers
4. Encouraging Extended writing: Card sorting
5. Encouraging Extended writing: Using writing frames
6. Connectives, heads and tails and taboo
7. Directed Activities Related to Text

Download details of these [ideas and activities](#).

### **Conclusion**

All teachers need to be able to judge whether they are achieving the right balance between helping pupils to structure their writing (through the use of card sorting, ordering and writing frames, for example) and encouraging them to undertake their own open-ended writing tasks. The ability to achieve good quality extended writing, which conveys clear geographical knowledge and understanding, is both important as an end in itself and as a signifier of the development of pupils' thinking. Critical thinking, reasoning and decision making can all be assessed within well structured extended writing in geography.

### **Bibliography**

Butt, G. (forthcoming) *Assessing literacy across the curriculum*. Into Teaching.

Butt, G. (1993) The effects of 'audience centred' teaching on children's writing in geography. *International Research in Geographical and Environmental Education*, 2, 10, p. 11-24.

Butt, G. (1998) Increasing the effectiveness of audience centred teaching in geography. *International Research in Geographical and Environmental Education*, 7, 3, p. 203-218. [Download](#)

Butt, G. (2001) [Theory into Practice: Extending Writing Skills](#). Sheffield: Geographical Association.

Butt, G. (2002) Language and Learning. In Smith, M. (ed) *Teaching Geography in Secondary School*. London: RoutledgeFalmer, p. 200-211.

- Butt, G. (2005) Engaging with Extended Writing. *Teaching Geography*, 30, 1, p. 55-7.
- Counsell, C. (2004) *Analytical and Discursive Writing: Second (revised and extended) Edition*, London: Historical Association.
- DfEE (2001) *Literacy Across the Curriculum*. London: DfEE.
- DfES (2004) *Key Stage 3 National Strategy: Literacy in geography*. London: DfES.
- Owen, C. (2001) Developing literacy through key stage 3 geography. *Teaching Geography*, 26, 4, pp. 160-6.
- QCA (2001) *Literacy across the curriculum*. London: QCA.
- Rawding, C. (2002) Literacy across the curriculum: some options for geography. *Teaching Geography*, 27, 3, p. 112-4
- Rider, R. (2001) Using literacy to enhance a scheme of work on rivers. *Teaching Geography*, 26, 4, p. 175-8
- Roberts, M. (2003) *Learning through Enquiry: Making sense of Geography in the KS3 classroom*, Sheffield: The Geographical Association. (Chapter 4: The role of language; Chapter 6: Writing)
- Sheeran, Y. & Barnes, D. (1991) *School Writing: Discovering the ground rules*. Milton Keynes: Open University Press.
- Slater, F. (1989) *Language and Learning in the Teaching of Geography*. London: Routledge.
- Taylor, L. (2004) *Re-presenting geography*. Cambridge: Chris Kington Publishing.
- Thompson, L. and Krause, J. (2001) The key stage 3 National Literacy Strategy. *Teaching Geography*, 26, 4, p. 167-8
- Thompson, L. , Roberts, D., Kinder, A. and Apicella, P. (2001) Raising literacy standards in geography lessons. *Teaching Geography*, 26, 4, p. 169-174
- Wray, D. and Lewis, M. (1997) *Extending literacy: children reading and writing non fiction*. London: Routledge.