

Ofsted: What is effective practice in using writing in geography?

(Source: Geography: Learning to make a world of difference, Ofsted, February 2011)

In just over half the schools visited, pupils who showed their good understanding in their oral responses and in discussion failed to communicate at the same level in writing. Their responses were often basic and lacked depth in terms of geography, as in the example from Key Stage 2 below:

Work on the village involved a field walk and various photographs. Although many of the photographs taken were of the river, the focus of the writing was very much on developing language rather than geography. Alongside photographs were captions such as: 'The water glistens and flows gently'; 'Sometimes you can see water voles, fish and birds'; 'The stream sometimes looks still.' There was no real attempt to develop geographical language.

When teachers set extended written work, the pupils in both primary and secondary schools often copied text from other sources. However, writing in a range of genres is central to independent enquiry and research. Examples seen included:

- tourist leaflets (a visitor's guide to an African national park)
- a letter to a friend about a landscape
- a letter about climate in Britain, giving advice for a holiday
- directions
- fact files and research, such as about European countries
- a newspaper report about cliff erosion
- essays, for example about nuclear power as part of a future energy strategy in Britain.

Generally, in the secondary schools visited, opportunities for purposeful extended writing were limited. Extended writing was not encouraged by what was required in many geography examinations, namely short answers and 'sound bites' rather than analysis and explanation.

The best teaching seen built the confidence of pupils through a series of short tasks integrating literacy skills and geography. This frequently led to improvements in standards in the subject, as illustrated in the example below.

In a Year 8 lesson about the causes and effects of volcanoes, students quickly shared what they already knew and listened to an eye-witness account to

identify key vocabulary. In pairs, they began an exercise to sequence the account, in order, before sorting a set of words and statements into 'causes' and 'descriptions' and finally sharing with the class what they had learnt. The discussion revealed a very good understanding of how and why earthquakes occur, linked to clear details about their impact on both physical and human environments.

In those schools visited that were using writing effectively to enhance learning in geography, some or all of the following characteristics were evident:

- Efforts were made to make writing tasks purposeful through seeking real and relevant situations, frequently linked to current affairs.
- Pupils were given regular opportunities for extended writing.
- Writing tasks were often tackled in stages, with feedback or review at each stage of planning and drafting.
- Tasks were matched well to pupils' different needs, particularly to support pupils whose literacy skills were poor.
- Pupils were given opportunities to develop different styles of writing in geography, for example :
 - instructional writing; giving directions as part of a map-reading exercise
 - recount; writing up a field trip
 - explanation; how erosion occurs
 - information; providing an itinerary for a family visiting London for a weekend break
 - persuasion; planning and creating an ecological flyer
 - discursive writing; producing a magazine article on changes in climate
 - analysis; an analytical essay on factors impacting on deforestation
 - evaluation; reflections on and making judgements about the outcomes of a traffic survey.
- Content, meaning and effect were supported by teachers' high expectations in terms of legible handwriting, spelling and accurate grammar.

The best practice occurred in schools where the development of reading, writing, speaking and listening skills was a central part of departmental or school policy.

In one of the schools visited, the pupils were expected to answer questions in full sentences. The lessons were seldom quiet because the pupils often worked in pairs, sharing what they knew and understood through working conversation. They also developed good social skills. They were expected to write in a variety of ways. For example, empathy with the people of Sicily was expressed through writing a newspaper report on a volcanic eruption; vivid poetry expressed deep feelings about child workers in economically less developed countries.