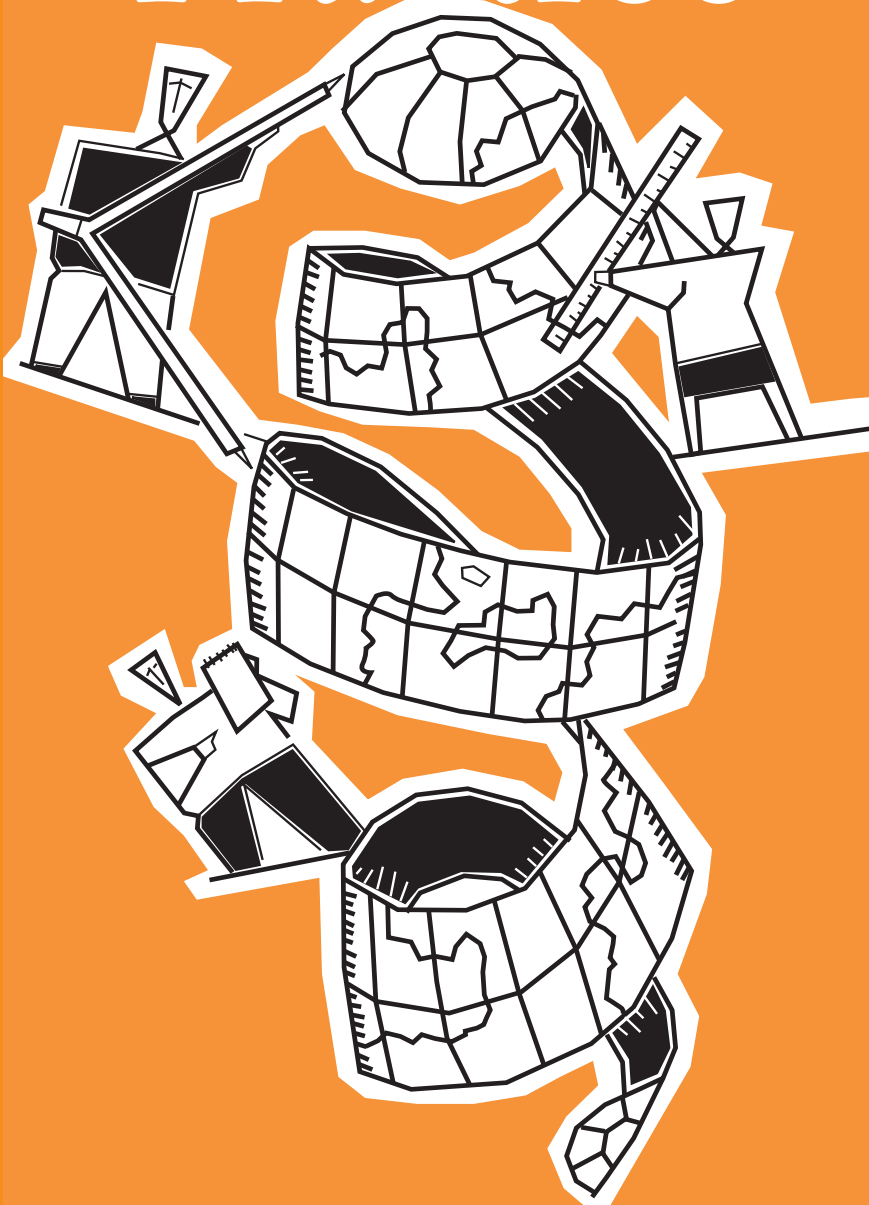


Theory INTO Practice



Extending Writing Skills

GRAHAM BUTT

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT
FOR GEOGRAPHY TEACHERS
Series editors: Mary Biddulph and Graham Butt



Geographical
Association



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Introduction

Establishing effective communication in the classroom is fundamental to teaching and learning geography, or indeed any subject. Some forms of communication are particular to geography - for example, maps, aerial photographs and satellite images - and these have their own collections of research. This book, however, is primarily concerned with written communication and the ways in which writing activities in the geography classroom can assist or, if used injudiciously, hinder the learning process. The main focus of this book is, therefore, the expression of geographical concepts and ideas through writing, although some attention is also given to talking, listening and reading within the geography classroom as a precursor to successful writing; indeed discussion among students is often an essential pre-requisite to the completion of good quality extended writing in geography.

A number of small-scale classroom-based research projects conducted over the past ten years in a variety of comprehensive schools in the West Midlands have provided the foundations for this book. However, the particular activities described here took place over a fourteen-week period. The overall aim of the action research has been to address a fundamental, but extremely broad question: 'How can the different uses of language in the geography classroom help young people write more effectively?'

A considerable literature already exists concerning the relationship between language, thought development and learning, some of which has been interpreted specifically for teachers of geography (see, for example, Williams, 1981; Slater, 1989; Carter, 1991; Butt, 1997). There are also several general texts that seek to help teachers promote the broader use of language in their classrooms (Andrews, 1989; Sheeran and Barnes, 1991; Wray and Lewis 1994, 1997; McCarthy and Carter, 1994; SCAA, 1997a,b). This literature has been supplemented by a variety of QCA booklets (some of which also report on research findings) which seek to promote the improvement of young people's literacy in line with recent government initiatives (QCA, 1999a,b). However, a number of significant questions concerning how students use language to learn still remain to be answered. As Lambert and Balderstone state:

'many questions relating to the role of language in cognitive development remain unanswered. In particular, more research is needed into the processes by which children use language both to learn and to develop their understanding of concepts through talking and writing. The difficulty in collecting and interpreting such evidence is one reason for the lack of evidence. There are also problems isolating specific learning associated with language development from other learning processes in the classroom' (2000, p. 214).



The point of this book, and indeed of all the titles in this series, is to bring theory and practice together so that teachers understand how educational research can help them to become more effective practitioners in the classroom. This book therefore has its origins in the notion that teaching is a research-based profession. It is written from the stance that the use of language is essential for communicating what is known and understood, and is also fundamental to the whole *process* of learning. It should help geography teachers become more fully aware of their role in creating the conditions in which students can successfully 'talk and write to learn'.



1: Communication in the geography classroom

It is a truism that teacher talk tends to dominate the communication that occurs within the classroom. Geography teachers are like all other subject teachers in this respect:

- we create fixed sets of rules for the ways in which we want students to communicate with us ('hands up', 'don't shout out'),
- we establish periods in each lesson when students are expected to restrict the communication they engage in ('when I'm talking you must listen to me', 'too much noise - you should all be writing now'), and
- we encourage students to communicate orally in different ways (for example, when answering 'whole class' questions, reporting back from group activities as individuals, giving mini presentations).

The times when students can 'legitimately' communicate orally are usually quite restricted and they soon learn the accepted parameters for communication in the geography classroom. When we as geography teachers consider just how important talking is to the whole learning process, we begin to realise that the opportunities we offer students to engage in subject related discussion or questioning are educationally extremely significant. If we totally dominate in the classroom and the process of oral communication becomes 'one way', then the learning experience for many students is restricted. If they are to understand fully the subject's concepts, ideas and terminology students must regularly engage in talking about geography, as well as listening to the teacher and their peers. The significant point is that talking is often the precursor both to learning and to the production of good quality extended writing (Williams, 1981; Slater, 1989). Without some opportunity to discuss the geographical tasks and concepts in front of them many students do not produce substantial pieces of sound geographical writing.

Much has been written about the ways in which teachers communicate in geography classrooms, particularly through oral question-and-answer sessions (see, for example, Roberts, 1986; Carter, 1991; Butt, 1997). Attention has also been given to the manner in which such communication may either stretch student thinking into new areas, or merely repeat a game of rote memorisation of facts, which students must regurgitate from one geography lesson to the next. The majority of questions we ask in class are 'closed' in that only one 'right' answer is possible; often we phrase such questions in such a way as



to offer our students very limited opportunities to explore new thoughts and ideas in geography. Similarly many 'recall' questions simply test what the students already know, rather than encouraging new understandings.

Why do we pose so many closed questions (both orally and in the writing tasks we expect students to complete)? I would argue that there are several reasons for this, some of which relate closely to issues of class management and others to our preparedness to take risks. Closed questions are certainly easier to frame than open questions; they can be assessed quickly and are more convenient for keeping academic 'control' of a lesson. A series of one word answers may also have the advantage of driving the pace of a lesson, involving the participation of a large number of students in the class and not threatening the teacher with the possibility of deviating into areas that he or she has not planned for. This is true for all closed oral (or written) questions, whether they are set against a 'stimulus' – a piece of text, a statistical diagram, a map – or any other resource. By comparison, 'open-ended' questions invite rather more tentative and exploratory answers, which in themselves provide evidence of fresh thinking and new learning. This may, in turn, create management and assessment problems within the geography classroom. Nonetheless, such questions are truly 'educational' in that they push students into higher order thinking and reasoning, often by making them engage in analysis, in synthesis, in decision-making and in formulating conclusions.

Marsden (1995) describes what he considers to be the features of good questioning within the geography classroom. The list below is based on his work on oral questions and answers, but some points apply equally well to written questions.

Marsden (1995) reminds teachers to:

- 1 ask questions fluently and precisely,
- 2 gear questions to the students' state of readiness,
- 3 involve a wide range of students in the question and answer process,
- 4 focus questions on a wide range of intellectual skills, and not just on recall,
- 5 ask probing questions,
- 6 not accept each answer as having equal validity,
- 7 sensitively redirect questions to allow accurate and relevant answers to emerge, and
- 8 use open-ended as well as closed questions in order to invite creative thought and value judgements.

Asking a high proportion of closed questions, either in oral or written work, may be organisationally convenient in that it enables us to get students to 'do something' without too much fuss – but it is often the case that not much real learning is going on!

The language of students

If we accept that it is important to give students opportunities to discuss the geography they are learning and to answer thought provoking open-ended questions, what does this imply about the ways in which we think geography should be taught? First, we should encourage students to use language in *exploratory* ways, rather than solely in *transactional* ways. That is, we should allow students to use personal and expressive forms of language (exploratory) which help to reveal what they think, feel and believe.



Photograph of students removed for copyright reasons

Photo: News Team International Ltd.

By contrast, transactional language, which is more formal and structured, is used to convey factual information and concepts in a logical and ordered sequence. Unfortunately teachers often expect students to be able to produce good quality transactional writing too quickly and with little support. Students must be given opportunities to 'play' with language to discover new meanings, rather than simply use it to convey final answers. As Lambert and Balderstone suggest:

'Students should be given opportunities to talk in a range of contexts and for a variety of purposes in geography including describing and explaining, negotiating and persuading, exploring and hypothesising, challenging and arguing' (2000, p. 215).

A strand of research, which has been developed around these ideas, looks at both developing thinking skills and supporting students in analysing how they learn. For example, Leat (1998, 2000), Leat and Nichols (1999) and Leat and Kinninment (2000) have explored the ways in which students 'think about their thinking' (metacognition).



These researchers have sought to analyse the language that students use when solving problems and have encouraged students to think about how they learn, so that they can approach subsequent geographical tasks and questions more effectively. Although this work has not yet been extended fully into researching students' writing, it has made some important links between thinking, talking and writing.

Second, we can offer students the opportunity to talk by using role-play and simulation activities and decision-making exercises in geography, most of which will involve group work at some stage. Some geography teachers are concerned that such activities may transfer control of the learning process from them to the students. While this is a justifiable concern, teachers must accept that it is also the only way in which students will start to learn for themselves, rather than relying directly on the teacher for instruction and guidance. It is also important to remember that:

'over-enthusiastic interventions [by the teacher] often takes the initiative away from the students, who should be developing an understanding of their roles and responsibilities in maintaining discussions and completing set tasks'
(Butt, 1997, p. 159).

Ensuring that students engage constructively in more independent learning is not always easy and takes time; it is only after the fears of messy and non-directed learning are conquered that students can move towards more independent and valuable forms of learning with language. This is not to say that 'anything goes' - even though students will be offered greater space and time to discuss or write freely, properly conducted discussion work or exploratory writing still needs very clearly defined and expressed parameters.

From talking to writing

Although teachers tend to dominate oral communication in the geography classroom and often restrict opportunities for meaningful student talk, the main focus for this book is on students' writing. Two key questions present themselves in relation to this focus:

1. How can we ensure that geography students engage in high quality extended writing?
2. What is the link between writing and learning in the geography classroom?

In relation to question 1, let us start by considering what is meant by the phrase 'high quality extended writing'. Many students produce writing that is poorly structured, overly concise and unbalanced, and which is also incapable of conveying complex messages, ideas and thoughts. Although the reasons for this are numerous, often the key to the regular production of unsatisfactory extended writing lies in the nature of the task originally set by the teacher. For example, if you ask a student to name the capital of Spain or to state the term given to the movement of material by a river, you will get a one-word answer! Extended writing can, therefore, only be produced if we ask or encourage students to ask the right kinds of questions, i.e. questions that encourage and necessitate an extended form of response. Students can learn that comparatively



straightforward and simple open-ended questions require particular written responses if they are to be answered effectively. Writing frames (pages 31-32) provide a good starting point for this type of work.

Next we need to consider what, from the student's viewpoint, he or she could reasonably be expected to write, given the task set. If closed questions are asked too regularly as the focus for writing tasks, students may find it both conceptually difficult, and structurally taxing, to escape from the usual 'one word answer' syndrome when they are attempting to produce a piece of extended writing. Merely stating that their answer to a particular question should be 'at least one side long' gives no help whatsoever! Instead it leaves the mechanisms, techniques and connections necessary for producing high quality extended writing unclear. Only when the steps towards the production of extended writing are mutually understood, and the means of achieving it become readily apparent and easily recalled by the students, will they succeed in creating analytical, explanatory and purposeful extended writing in geography.

The second question is more complex. The link between writing and learning in the geography classroom requires the support of research evidence to help us understand the processes at work when students 'write to learn'. The next chapter addresses the ways in which geography teachers can use the results of this research (and recommendations from it) to help students to improve their extended writing skills, and therefore their learning, in geography.