

# Supporting Teachers to Become 'Geo-Literate': The Why, What & How

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# The Why – Context in Singapore

- MOE's belief: A key aspect of empowering students to communicate effectively in English is understanding and meeting the **literacy demands and requirements** in various disciplines (ELIS, 2012)
- Subject Literacy is the ability to use academic language appropriately, meaningfully and precisely in a given subject area. It requires both proficiency in **language** and **subject knowledge**. As well as conveying subject content through **presentational** modes of language use, subject teachers can also facilitate thinking and understanding of content through **interactional** modes of language use in the classroom (ELIS, 2012).

# Why Subject Literacy in Every Subject?

**ALL** teachers need to develop further their ability to communicate effectively in English, so that they can:

1. More effectively guide and support students to achieve the desired student learning outcomes;
2. Communicate subject knowledge more clearly and effectively to their students;
3. Ensure students effectively communicate subject content knowledge and clearly articulate their perspectives, reasoning and conclusions.

# Why & What for Geography Teachers

## Motivation:

Inclusion of a [Literacy Guide](#) in the Lower Secondary Geography syllabuses (2014)

Workshop duration: 12 hours

# How

## Workshop on Effective Communication in the Geography Classroom, from 2015

### 1. Short Term Learning Outcomes:

- understand key concepts
- identify language-specific demands for Geography;
- understand and apply strategies for language support

### 2. Long Term Learning Outcome:

- build a sense of teacher identity in the subject, Geography.

# Effective Communication in the Geography Classroom

## Task Assignment & Presentation

- Identify a specific literacy outcome (academic language, functional language or text type) that you would like to address.
- Plan and carry out the task/activity that addresses this learning outcome using at least **ONE strategy** in this workshop.
- The task/activity should engage students in interaction with each other which may **lead to some form of writing**.

# Effective Communication in the Geography Classroom

## General Teacher Feedback

### Some useful idea(s) from the workshop I would like to apply;

1. Word wall, hot seating, use of comic strips, sentence starters, editing and highlighting key words, functional use of language and text types, integrating visual sketches into explanation, use of descriptors to write better;
2. Interesting ideas shared by other teachers during presentations – paying attention to receptive as well as productive use of language, giving students the production space to engage in quality learning.
3. Allocating time for variety of student – teacher interaction. Progression from verbal to written activity.
4. Linguistic awareness in writing and speaking responses.

### Some ways that the learning experience can be improved:

1. Have a full day for the second session as well; and
2. Have a teacher leader use some of the strategies shared and video it as a learning exercise.

# Effective Communication in the Geography Classroom

## General Teacher Feedback

How did the workshop, “Effective Communication in the Geography classroom”, **develop your awareness of language specific issues in teaching Geography?**

- Importance of **paying attention to the language features** relevant to Geography (content vocabulary, functional language)
- How **we can work with the students** – precise scaffolding according to the needs, strategy of differentiating text types and making Geography accessible to the learners
- My professional identity as a Geography teacher – expectations of self, of the subject and students



# Effective Communication in the Geography Classroom

From the task assignments, two teachers' learning points:

Q: What is the shift or impact on your identity (how you see, communicate, think and act) as a Geography teacher?

**As far as possible, I no longer accept students' brief/one-word (verbal) answers or (verbal) answers that make use of layman's terms – instead, I make it a point to make them either explain/elaborate further, or to make use of key content vocabulary in their (verbal) responses. I now make explicit reference to/highlight the use of content vocabulary during my lessons, and stress its importance in writing and answering verbal questions to students.**

Q. Has it affected the way you now design your learning tasks and/or choice of resources for use in class?

**In terms of the language used, am now more sensitive to sources / materials that students may have difficulty comprehending and therefore preps me in advance of certain words that needs to be unpacked first. Also, in the way I have been teaching structures, which I need to be more explicit with writing/sentence frames to guide them better.**

# Interview With One Teacher

## 1. Awareness of literacy demands in shaping teacher's understanding of being Geo-literate:

- Made me **feel** about **how** my students write - how my **feedback** can be more **focused**.
- Use of language to show cause and effect got me thinking that there is so much about the **language** and the **subject**, and the whole **interplay** that needs to be worked out. English is a tool that can enable learning to be facilitated but I am trying to figure that out.
- The workshop has also opened up for me how language **can bring out** the content, especially how vocabulary (prepositional, adverbial phrases etc) can help.
- Aware of the geographical vocabulary to be used. Using **specific terminology** for specific **processes** – writing them on the board, saying it, writing it down, explaining it, using it in context.

# Interview With One Teacher

## 2. Impact on teachers' design of instructional tasks:

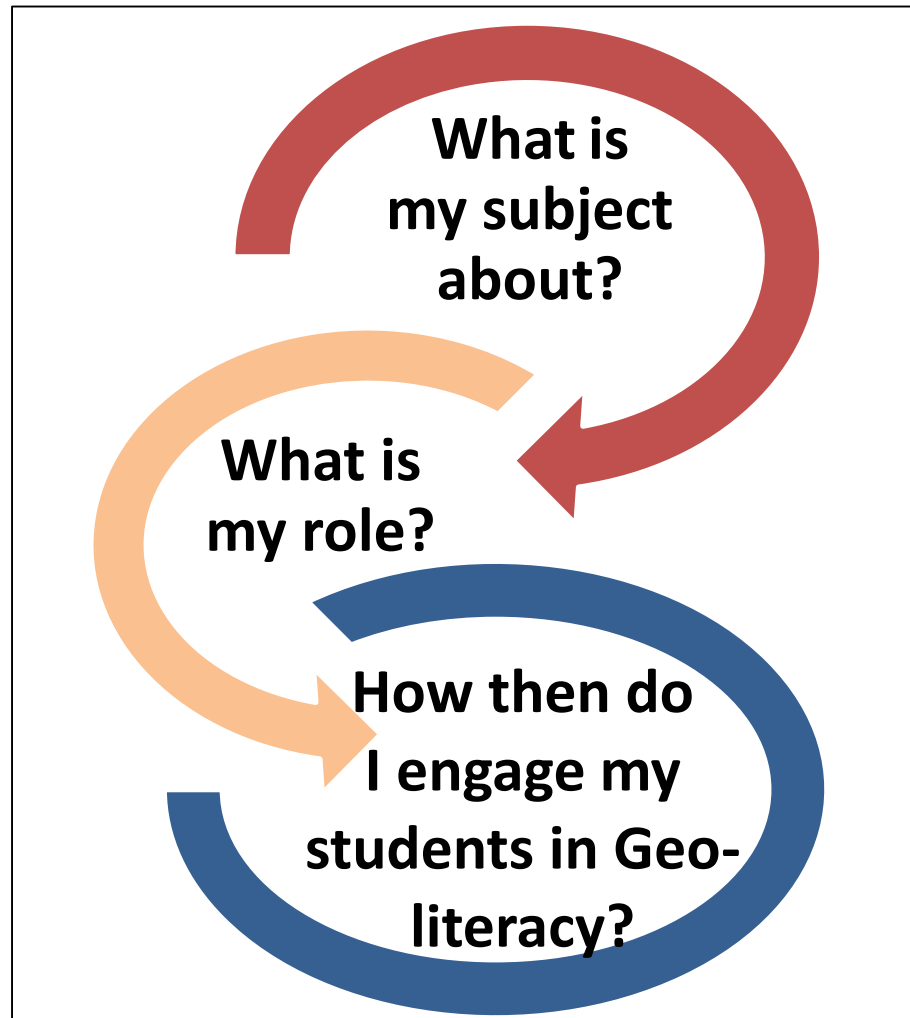
- Focus on **how students answer questions**, the words they use, the ideas, the thinking – how they crystallise the ideas and can then write – variety of modes: read, answer, listen, talk, articles on climate change – **a lot of opportunities to communicate**, sometimes opportunities to talk about what makes a good answer before they write.
- **Using the language appropriately** – right structures, etc., that show the train of thoughts – relevant to the question.
- Interpreting the data – **having the language tools in supporting the position** they need to take in their discussion.

# Facilitators' Feedback

- Emergent awareness of literacy demands in Geography
- Focus on precision and accuracy in the use of content vocabulary (e.g., BAV, hot seating, word walls)
- Varying levels of adaptation and integration of language support through explicit literacy strategies (e.g. sentence frames, writing frames, PEEL structures)
- Visible evidence of extended written texts attempted by students
- However, still few attempts to incorporate effective talk moves and strategies to open up talk in the classroom to support content learning and written communication

# Becoming Geo-Literate

The three aspects of teacher learning to becoming Geo-Literate will involve:



# Pedagogical Implications for Teacher Learning

- **Teacher modelling and demonstration of enactment** in infusing literacy strategies and scaffolding the process is vital;
- **Intentional choice of resources and materials & focused design of learning tasks** must be made explicit and deliberate to bring out the disciplinary literacy
- **Selection of appropriate strategies** to bring out the ‘geographical thinking/perspective’ through the use of subject-specific vocabulary; functional language to address learners’ literacy needs
- Need to provide **space and time for varied forms of receptive and productive** communication for students to internalise and process the learning before proceeding to more complex literacy demands (e.g., written explanations)

# Recommendations

## For change in practice to happen:

- ❖ Sustained professional learning in Geography Literacy through networking and exchange of resources
- ❖ Teacher agency and ownership critical for professional identity; supporting teachers to be active in their own process of professional learning; and
- ❖ Gradual growth and development over time

# A Journey Begun ...

## From covering a subject to teaching a discipline through Subject Literacy

Subject literacy is perhaps in many respects a **reconceptualization** of what it means **to teach an academic subject**. Disciplines are organized ways of thinking about the world, and learning within a discipline involves more than becoming merely knowledgeable.

**Learning must also encompass how geographers read, write, and think.**

This is the **difference between covering a subject and teaching a discipline.**

*Adapted from Buehl, 2011*



# References

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3. Shanahan, T., & Shanahan, C. (2008). Teaching disciplinary literacy to adolescents: Rethinking content-area literacy. *Harvard Educational Review*, 78 (1), 7-18.