Using non-examples

By Ashley Philipson

Non-examples are the opposite of examples. We use examples in our teaching to show a real-world example of an abstract concept we are teaching – this is a fundamental tool in many subjects. Where examples provide an instance of similarity, non-examples provide an instance of contrast.

Non-examples are important in teaching as they are another tool which can be used to allow pupils to develop their understanding. Being able to explain why something is not a correct example is as important as knowing the correct examples.

When I teach how coastal landforms have been created, I teach pupils about coastal landforms that have been formed through the process of erosion, *and* coastal landforms which have been formed the process of deposition. When pupils explain how features of coastal landforms have been made, a good answer will refer to the *process* involved, rather than just a *sequence* of what happens.

To help pupils identify the difference between the two processes, I use a non-example.

I might do this by saying:

> "a spit is a non-example of an erosional coastal feature"

And then I might explain why to pupils or, ask them to explain why to me.

This is a good non-example as some of its features are correct:

- it is a coastal feature *and*
- initially erosion has contributed to it

However, it has one difference:

- its final formation is created through deposition.

If pupils can understand and explain this, it shows they have a much deeper understanding of the concepts of erosion and deposition. Rather than learning something just because we have told them it is true; they begin to understand why and how, and then key concepts begin to make sense.

In this case pupils will have a deeper understanding of more than just that one example – they understand what erosion and deposition is and the resultant features and can therefore begin to apply this knowledge when explaining the formation of landforms in new contexts.