Thinking clearly

To communicate your ideas to others clearly, you must first be very clear about those ideas yourself. Clarity of thought is therefore very important, especially when it comes to communication. And everyday life is mainly about communication, especially in the workplace. Clarity of thought is not a gift but a discipline that has to be learnt. Which is why the National University of Singapore’s provost Tan Eng Chye has decided to introduce compulsory writing modules for its freshmen. For a start, about a quarter of the freshmen, or 1,500, will be put on the pilot programme from next August. Eventually, all freshmen will be expected to take the modules. Depending on what they select and their level of competence in English, students will learn a range of skills, from how to give effective presentations and take good notes, to how to analyse texts and construct coherent arguments within a chosen topic.

Professor Tan had attended presentations where students simply read from their notes. Others whom he interacted with were shy and could not articulate themselves clearly. He had also read minutes of meetings by graduates that were incoherent.

The university already has writing electives. But science, engineering and computer students shun them. As Prof Tan lamented in his blog last month, it is this group who requires the electives because the students “have far less opportunity to develop language and communications skills through their disciplinary modules”.

These students must realise how important the writing courses are for them. When they enter the workplace and rise up the career ladder, they will need to communicate more, with their superiors, their subordinates, their colleagues in the other departments and their clients. They cannot be fumbling for words to put across their thoughts, whether in their presentations or reports.