Can it be that we as ESL teachers might have the power to change students’ perceptions of themselves, thereby providing them opportunities to gain symbolic and cultural capital, by positioning them as knowledgeable about hurricanes in front of their English-dominant peers? That is what I set out to discover by offering a unit on hurricanes.

“Symbolic capital” is described by Christian and Bloome (2004) as the “privileged social status and social position that one may have in a particular situation” (p. 369). In addition, Christian and Bloome (2004) define “cultural capital” as the “knowledge held and valued by a particular culture and the ability to engage appropriately and effectively in the social practices that are associated with a particular culture” (p. 369). Yoon (2007) describes “identity” as the “multiple and shifting presentations of self that are demonstrated through actions and emotions” (p. 10). Yoon (2007) also states that “ELLs’ identities are shaped through actions that position them as resourceful and intellectual instead of powerless and inferior” (p.4). Anderson (2004) posits that “acts of positioning can be accomplished explicitly or implicitly, intentionally or otherwise (p.291).”

The Hurricane Unit

While tapping into their background knowledge, I was amazed at how unaware my students were that a hurricane (Sandy) had just taken place in their area. Except for one student who had seen the devastation (yet was unable to articulate clearly what caused it), the students had no relevant vocabulary in English to describe what had taken place. I began the lesson by placing the students in pairs to read hurricane books to each other and write their newly learned facts on Post-It® notes that were placed on the chart labeled “hurricanes”. As a class we later organized the facts into five categories: What are hurricanes? Hurricane formation; Hurricane devastation; Hurricane preparation; Hurricane supply kit. Many students had difficulty with the concepts of the hurricanes and even what hurricanes were, as many confused them with tornadoes. I used video clips and many kinesthetic strategies to help them with phrases such as “counterclockwise rotation.” As their knowledge base began to grow, I introduced slightly modified newspaper articles using reading strategies such as annotation and finding the verb and subject. Students’ essays, brochures, even a logo that one of the students created were displayed on the Hurricane bulletin board. These activities among many others provided the basis for the “meteorologists” to prepare for their presentations to the school.

The Hurricane Rap

The content and language vocabulary necessary for the acquisition of hurricane knowledge was, to say the least, challenging for these students, so I decided that we needed a Hurricane Rap. I created the refrain myself and presented it to the students, who were surprised that “Ms. Schor can rap” (and I must say that doing so increased my cultural capital significantly in the class). We then looked at the word wall which held many of the domain and academic vocabulary we had come upon during our investigation into hurricanes, and brainstormed phrases that rhymed. I took the collection of rhyming phrases that the students created and used most of them to devise the Hurricane Rap. We started practicing the Hurricane Rap in late winter.
As the time for the hurricane presentations was approaching, roles were assigned: One student was assigned to set up the presentation schedule with the teachers in order to address her speaking inhibitions. Another student was appointed to say the opening line after the refrain “What is a hurricane?” A third student designed the logo that the “meteorologists” wore as buttons that showed a swirl representing a hurricane with the motto “We’re serious about hurricanes!”

**It’s Hurricane Season!**

The students began their Hurricane Presentations on the first Monday in June to coincide with the start of Hurricane Season. The first presentation was a fifth grade class of their peers. The meteorologists showed the National Geographic “Hurricanes 101” video, gave a short presentation, performed the Hurricane Rap, and took questions from the audience. The following day, other teachers started signing up for the presentations and the meteorologists became “rock stars” in the school.

Many student made great progress as a result of this unit, including one, who initially had difficulty saying “meteorologist,” who spoke his lines so perfectly on the recording of the Hurricane Rap that they recorded his rendition for the district website. Yet another student, who formerly wanted to be a doctor, changed her mind; she now wants to be a meteorologist. Another highlight occurred when one student saw me in the hallway and said, “Miss, I have to tell you something. My friend wants to join ESL!”

The unit on hurricanes provided challenging, theme-based opportunities that included interpretive, interpersonal, and presentational modes of communicative instruction, opportunities to tap into the strengths and challenge the weaknesses of the students, a format for the ELL students to show their capabilities, a rap to hook the audience and to help the meteorologists remember the domain vocabulary, and a means of increasing the symbolic and cultural capital of the ELLs in the school.

**References**


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