

True Grit: Helping Students Survive Trauma

by Natalia de Cuba Romero and Ashley Fifer

As we picked our way past dangling wires and around downed trees to get to Albany and NYS TESOL 2012, our own institution—with one student dead, others displaced—now swarming with FEMA and emergency personnel converting our campus into a shelter, we realized that if there were any silver lining, it was that we had found a place where academic language and survival English intersect and that we had both a responsibility and an opportunity to exploit that area for the benefit of our students.

Superstorm Sandy almost prevented us from getting to NYS TESOL 2012, so it was fitting that our experience with the storm brought us to NYS TESOL 2013 to present a thematic unit based on storm preparation and disaster mitigation. From vocabulary to grammar points to earth-science content, student-generated writing and discussion, and opportunities for service learning, disaster-related units have it all, plus dramatic power. No one can resist a train wreck or sharing a dramatic experience.

Hurricane and winter storm preparation are predictable events that belong in your fall curriculum. The experience of developing that material (supplemented with current media) will also better prepare you to respond to less predictable events such as earthquakes and shooters. Start with target vocabulary appropriate to your level, which may include: (natural) disaster, hurricane/typhoon/cyclone, impact, aftermath, loot, resilience, recovery, destruction, displaced, shelter.

Then decide, content-wise, what students need to know. Do they need basic storm-preparation survival skills? Do they know where to get information on school closings or emergency shelters? Many of our students come from different climates; do they know how to prepare for a winter storm? What items will they need? Is this an opportunity to teach or reinforce content-area material such as climate, weather patterns, and geography?

Grammar-wise, there are a variety of options. Storm preparation is the perfect time to reinforce “do-aux.” Have students create a list of “dos and don’ts” of storm preparation. Alternately, use those lists to introduce or reinforce modals, refining understanding of *should* (suggestion) versus *must* (official) and *had better* (warning). The teacher can first elicit prior knowledge (students may have experienced similar events in their home countries or since coming to the States), then assign small groups to come up with their own lists. Divide and conquer. Each group can cover one aspect of preparedness or what to do in certain situations (think *if* clauses), which can result in a class pamphlet.

There are also excellent free and authentic resources available. Students can research the FEMA website (check out <http://www.ready.gov/kids> for games and other resources). The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) website <http://www.noaa.gov/index.html> is rich in storm-tracking information, and the Weather Ready Nation section contains storm-prep recommendations; it makes important distinctions between storm warning and storm watch. If there is technology available, teachers can walk students through a basic local weather report on television. If not, a transistor radio (an item you should have for your own storm preparation anyway!) can be used to tune into local weather reports, which in our area are broadcast at predictable intervals. Another resource is local government. After receiving a storm preparedness guide in the mail from a local legislator, we called his office and were able to get multiple full-color copies for our students, with emergency numbers that were current and relevant to their ZIP Code.

Man-made tragedies such as school shootings may be unexpected, but you can also prepare older students for them. What are your school, district, or campus policies on lockdown or lockout? Are your students signed up to the emergency alert system, if you have one? Invite the school's public safety official to your classroom for a Q&A session about safety procedures.

These issues also provide opportunities to see the constitution in action. The Second Amendment is all over the news, and at no time more than when there is a random shooting. From investigating the Bill of Rights to staging debates on gun control, you can use these situations to make civics real.

Whether the crisis is natural or man-made, the ESOL instructor should be prepared to help students process their experiences. After a major event, students want to talk, and we recommend letting them, perhaps in small groups. We use freewriting or journals to allow them to share their impressions and the impact.

And then we get back to more formal structures, eliciting vocabulary they had learned in class and later heard during the crisis or words they learned as events unfolded.

We also take articles and radio segments and adapt them for the students (Sandy's impact on the election was one). We had them take their freewriting and transform it into more formal reflections. And we also focused on taking positive action. Students in our program donated money, foodstuffs, and clothing, and—because our campus became a shelter—became important translators for emergency workers on the ground.

Finally, it is important for classroom teachers to recognize when students are traumatized by the events. We brought a psychological counselor from the campus to provide grief counseling to the class whose classmate died during the storm. We helped students identify agencies that could help them. And we made sure we could identify the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder and refer students as needed.

Working with your students to help them cope with trauma and disaster will pay rich dividends in their learning and their lives.

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