

Promising Practices

This is an ongoing column, featuring advice for effective teaching. Please send article submissions to the column editor, Ann C. Wintergerst, at promisingpractices@idiom.nystesol.org

Best Practices for SIFE Students through Cultural Imagery

by Cynthia Douglas

Students with interrupted formal education (SIFE) are in our classrooms, and it is our responsibility to incorporate best practices that will access their prior knowledge and develop their skills in order to be engaged learners and productive members of society. The New York State Education Department (NYSED) defines the SIFE population as those LEP/ELLs who:

- Come from a home in which a language other than English is spoken and enter a school in the United States after Grade 2;
- Have had at least two years fewer schooling than their peers;
- Function at least two years below expected grade level in reading and mathematics;
- May be preliterate in their native language.

(Retrieved from <http://www.p12.nysed.gov/biling/docs/NYSEDSIFEGuide>)

Teachers must use what I call cultural imagery in their lesson plan development and classroom practices. Cultural imagery is the representation of culture in the form of symbols, iconography, text, and artifacts; it is identified for each SIFE student depending on his or her background and language skills. This is vital not only to the development of their prior knowledge but also critical to making connections to their $i + 1$ learning (Krashen, 1985) in the form of culturally responsive pedagogy. Thus, teachers must identify the cultural imagery necessary to access the students' previous knowledge to initiate and build cognitive creativity and growth. SIFE students would benefit from classroom practices centering on the basic building blocks of knowledge that connect to the cultural imagery significant to them as individuals. For example, if a teacher has SIFE students from Haiti in class, he or she should first complete a cultural inventory of those students by answering the following items:

- What background do you know about your students?
- Their country of origin?
- Cultural knowledge?
- Language(s)?
- Educational history?
- Ethnicity?
- Prior knowledge about the subject you are teaching?
- What learning experiences will students engage in?
- How are experiences culturally responsive?
- How do activities relate to their prior knowledge or cultural experience?
- What resources and materials will be used in this lesson to link to the students' cultures, language, and community?

Once the cultural inventory is completed, it is connected to the cultural imagery, hence creating culturally responsive lesson plans. Connecting the cultural inventory to the cultural imagery will simultaneously advance the conceptual framework of $i + 1$ as culturally responsive pedagogy. To illustrate, the cultural imagery of Haiti could be represented through Haitian folklore, the arts, cuisine, agriculture, holidays, religions, symbols, and theater, to name some possibilities. Use the cultural imagery to link it to the topic being taught. For example, if the water cycle is the topic, in order to assist SIFE students, the vocabulary must be set up using cultural imagery. Students should keep a journal

that directly relates to the subject—science, in this instance—and write under the subheading of Water Cycle. Next, the teacher should look into using the Google Translate website or a bilingual picture dictionary to establish basic word translations of water, cloud, precipitation, evaporation, vapor, condensation, and snow, for example. Then, after the translations are confirmed, the teacher links the words in both languages to the cultural imagery of Haiti. The teacher can use a Promethean board, for example, to show pictures of clouds over a Haitian countryside, a rainstorm in Haiti, and other weather phenomena. For the concept of snow, an ice machine making shaved ice could be used to produce the snow-like sensation, and the teacher could show some pictures of snow in America. The point with cultural imagery is to connect the concepts being taught to something that the SIFE students have some experience with in their cache of prior knowledge, albeit in a formal educational setting. Use the cultural imagery to connect to the lived experiences of the students.



The Citadel in Haiti is a national symbol. Haitian students can identify what is going on in this picture regarding the water cycle after identifying vocabulary in a bilingual context. The students would use a chart to identify vocabulary from the picture such as the following:

The Water Cycle—Dlo Sik La

English

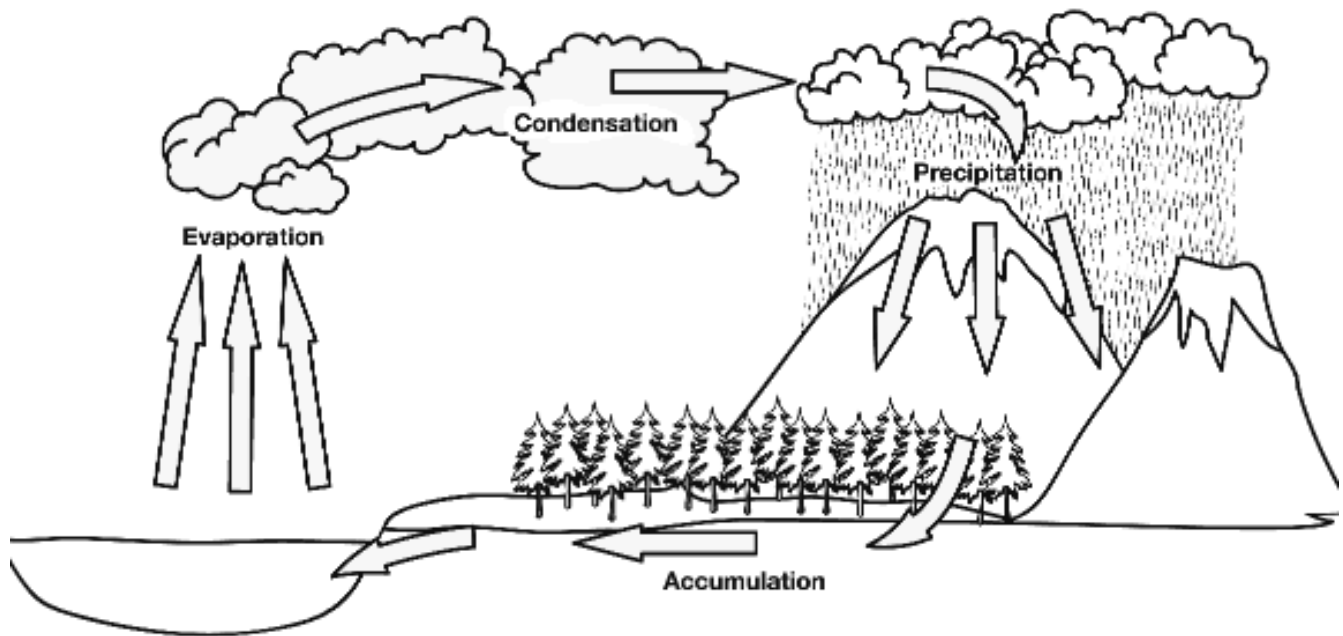
1. precipitation—water that falls to the ground as rain, snow, sleet
2. evaporation—to change from a liquid into a gas
3. rain—water that falls in drops from clouds in the sky
4. cloud—a white or gray mass in the sky that is made of many very small drops of water.
5. water—the clear liquid that has no color, taste, or smell, that falls from clouds as rain, that forms streams, lakes, and seas, and that is used for drinking, washing, and cleaning
6. condensation—the process by which a gas cools and becomes a liquid
7. accumulation—to increase gradually in amount as time passes.

Haitian Kreyol

1. presipitasyon—dlo ki tonbe nan te a tankow lapli, elatriye
2. evaporasyon—likid kichanje an gaz
3. lapli—gout dlo ki soti nan nyaj nan syel la
4. nwaj—yon mas blan oubyen tou gri nan syèl la konpoze ak anpil ti gout dlo
5. dlo—likid kiklè ki pa gen okenn koulè, gou, oswa sant, ki soti nan nwaj tankou grenn lapli, ki fòme rivyè, lak, ak lanmè, yo itilize pou lave, bwè, elatriye
6. kondansasyon—pwosesis la pa ki yon gaz refwadi epi li vin tounen yon likid
7. akimilasyon—ogmante piti nan kantite lajan kòm tan pase

(Retrieved from <http://www.learnersdictionary.com>)

SIFE students can then watch a video at <http://www.brainpopjr.com/science/weather/watercycle/> in order to understand the basic concepts of the water cycle in the English language. Students can also use the following graphic to reinforce the water cycle process:



(Retrieved from <http://www.superteacherworksheets.com>)

Teachers now link the graphic back to the picture of the Citadel in Haiti and discuss the concepts where they see evaporation, condensation, precipitation, and accumulation. SIFE students need such a comprehensive approach in order to connect to their prior knowledge. Through the creation of a cultural inventory and a cache of cultural imagery, educators can connect to their SIFE students to implement $i + 1$ learning that reinforces culturally responsive pedagogy. The totality of these elements will push SIFE students to succeed academically in the 21st century.

References/Resources

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Cynthia Douglas received her Ph.D. from the University of Arizona, and teaches at St. John's University's Oakdale campus. Her research interests are in culturally responsive education, secondary and adult English language learners, SIFE students, and issues in the realm of diversity.

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