

## True Grit: Tips for Turning Tragedies Into Triumphs

by [Natalia de Cuba Romero](#) and [Ashley Fifer](#)

With one student dead, many others displaced, and our campus converted into a FEMA shelter for Nassau County, Superstorm Sandy in the fall of 2012 left both students and faculty of our intensive English program—Language Immersion at Nassau Community College (LINCC)—devastated and traumatized.

As our community of 250 students and 16 faculty and staff returned to classes, we knew we couldn't simply pick up where we'd left off as if nothing had happened. There was serious shock among our students, many of whom had come to the United States thinking that such disasters didn't happen here. They were rattled. We also realized that understanding the language of storm preparation and crisis is of critical importance to their safety. It was time to transform tragedy into important language and content learning.

### Choosing Content

We created a thematic unit that would be rich in vocabulary, grammatical structures, and highly pragmatic content. We decided we needed to address the following:

- Storm preparation (for predictable events such as hurricanes. Hurricanes are particularly common in the fall in our area; your area may be prone to flooding or fires or blizzards)
- Emergency preparedness (for unexpected events such as earthquakes)
- Emergency responses (in the case of active shooters, for example)
- Accessing reliable information
- Expressing and processing emotional reactions to disasters
- Recovering from disaster (including ways to volunteer or make donations)

### Remain Focused on Linguistic Objectives

While emotions were running high and content seemed to be of the utmost importance, we recognized that our primary role in the lives of our students—high school and college graduates who are polishing their academic English in order to enter our community college as freshmen—is as assistants to language acquisition. So for each content area, we were careful to embed linguistic objectives. Here are some successful pairings of content and language goals for storm preparation:

- Target vocabulary leveled to the students (e.g., *natural disaster*, *hurricane/typhoon/cyclone*, *aftermath*, *resilience*, *recovery*, *meteorology*)
- Making questions
- Reading for information
- “Do-aux” (making lists of the “dos and don’ts” of emergency preparedness)
- Reinforcement of modals (refining understanding of *should* [suggestion] versus *must* [official] and *had better* [warning])

## A Prestorm Activity: Step-by-Step

We then adapted a variety of free media resources to serve both the content and linguistic goals. The following is a step-by-step example of a prestorm activity.

1. Locate short articles in the local press, [U.S.A. Today](#), or [The Weather Channel](#) that contain the target vocabulary. Choose one to use and adapt it to the level of your students.
2. Elicit prior knowledge of storms and weather-related vocabulary (engagement and discussion).
3. Ask for predictions based on the headline (encourage active reading).
4. Have the students create questions that they want answered by the article (this can be a group exercise on the board that practices making questions).
5. Read the article individually or as a group and then review: Were the questions answered?
6. Listen to a weather report (broadcast at regular intervals on radio or online) as a class, and have students listen for new vocabulary and to compare and contrast with reading (listening, vocabulary reinforcement).
7. Decide how to prepare for a storm. In groups, students prepare lists using “do” and “don’t” or modals, or the imperative, as appropriate (group work, writing, focused grammar practice).
8. Allow students to compare their final lists to those of the [Federal Emergency Management Agency](#) (FEMA), especially their [kid’s guide](#), or contact your local legislator for extra copies of the preparedness guides they send to their constituents—an invaluable tool they usually give out for free (comparative analysis, critical reading, reading for information).
9. The [National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration \(NOAA\)](#) website is rich in storm-tracking information, and the [Storm Ready](#) section contains storm-prep recommendations; it makes important distinctions between storm warning and storm watch, for example.
10. Extension activities: A wrap-up writing assignment could be how students can better prepare for a storm using modals and do/don’t or a past storm experience using past tenses, and so on. A science teacher might use this as a jumping off point to teach weather patterns. Groups can also prepare presentations or posters on storm readiness.

## Other Considerations

### Prepare for the Unexpected

The previous lessons serve in the case of relatively predictable events. However, other events are less predictable. 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? Have students review these, identifying target vocabulary.

- Are your students signed up to the emergency alert system, if you have one? Here is a perfect opportunity to practice following written instructions.
- Invite the school's public safety official to your classroom for a Q&A session about safety procedures. Students practice making and asking questions. They may also take notes and then produce a summary.

### **How Does It Fit Other Content?**

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.

### **Honoring the Emotional Impact**

“By giving hope for the future and providing order, structure and a sense of normalcy, education can help to mitigate the psychosocial effects of conflict, disaster and displacement” (UNESCO, 2010).

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 in light of our Superstorm Sandy experience and a lockdown incident involving a shooting in the vicinity of the college, we recommend letting them, perhaps in small groups. We use freewriting or journals to allow them to share their impressions and the impact events have had on them.

Given the frequency of shootings and terrorist attacks of all natures lately and the fact that many of them involve marginalized populations or school settings, it is important to give students experience in discussing the issues in an academic environment. So 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 next election was one).

And we also focused on taking positive action.

### **Giving Back**

In the aftermath (there is that word again!) students in our program donated money, foodstuffs, and clothing, and—because our campus became a shelter—they became important translators for emergency workers on the ground.

### **When to Get Additional Help**

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 posttraumatic stress disorder and refer students as needed. The [Anxiety and Depression Association of America](http://www.anxietyanddepression.org/) is one place to start.

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

## Reference

UNESCO (2010). Nine reasons to provide education during and after conflicts and disasters. Retrieved from <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/unesco/themes/pcpd/education-in-emergencies/nine-reasons/>

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