

## Introduction

Download the LearnEnglish Themes podcast. You'll find more information on this page:  
<http://www.britishcouncil.org/learnenglish-podcasts-themes.htm>

This support pack contains the following materials:

- The article that you can listen to in the podcast
- An optional vocabulary activity based on the article
- Links to other activities on the LearnEnglish website on this theme (disasters).

## Read the article

### Natural disasters

by John Russell

*Natural disasters take many different forms and can happen without warning. Earthquakes, floods, volcanoes, drought, typhoons and hurricanes are all natural disasters.*

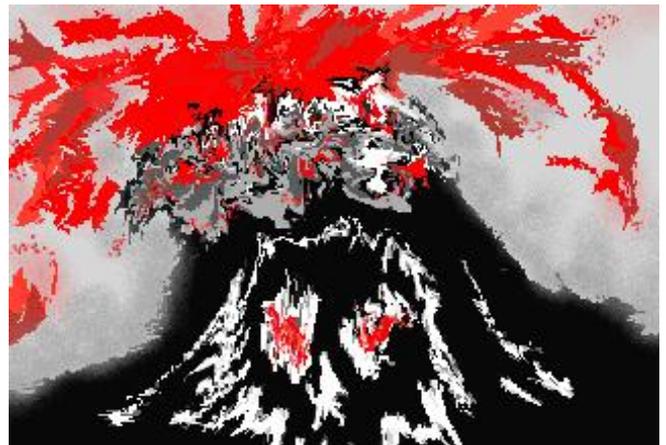
The earthquake of 26 December 2004 resulted in one of the worst natural disasters in living memory. It was a massive underwater quake and occurred in the Indian Ocean. This caused a huge tidal-wave (a tsunami) to cross the Indian Ocean. It destroyed coastlines, communities and brought death and destruction to many people. Thousands of people were killed as the wave travelled miles across the ocean to distant beaches. Whole families were swept out to sea or drowned as the sea invaded the land. The survivors need fresh water, food and shelter as well as medical help. People from all over the world are giving lots of money so that towns and villages can be rebuilt.

### Why do earthquakes happen?

The surface of the earth has not always looked as it does today; it is moving continuously (although very slowly) and has done so for billions of years. This is one cause of earthquakes, when one section the earth (tectonic plate) collides with another. Scientists can predict where (but not when) this might happen and the area between plates is called a fault line. On one fault line in Kobe, Japan in 1923 over 200,000 people were killed. However, earthquakes do not always happen on fault lines, which is why they are so dangerous and unpredictable.

### Where do volcanoes happen?

Volcanoes happen where the earth's crust is thin - lava, dust and gases burst out (erupt) from beneath the earth. They can rise into a massive cone shape - like a mountain and erupt, or they can be so violent that they just explode directly from the earth with no warning. There are 1511 'active' volcanoes in the world. This means that they may still be dangerous. In 1985 the massive Colombian volcano Nevado del Ruiz erupted. The lava melted a glacier and sent tones of mud down the town of Armero below. Twenty thousand people died.



### Can we predict earthquakes and volcanoes?

Natural disasters like volcanoes are often unpredictable. We regularly do not know when they might happen, or even where they will happen. In the future, scientists may be able to watch and predict events before they happen.

This could save many lives. In South America, scientists predicted the eruption of Popocatépetl. Tens of thousands of people were safely moved just before the biggest eruption of the volcano for a thousand years. No one was hurt.

### What is the difference between a Hurricane and a Tornado?

Hurricanes are extremely strong storms and often happen in the Caribbean. They cause high winds, huge waves, and heavy flooding and can be hundreds of miles across. In 1998, Hurricane Gilbert produced 160 mile an hour winds. It killed 318 people, and destroyed much of Jamaica. Tornadoes or 'twisters' are very strong spinning winds. They can move objects as big as a car and can blow buildings down. These are very common in West Africa and certain areas of the USA.

### Can too much rain cause problems?

Floods happen in many countries after very heavy rainfall. When rain pours for weeks at a time, rivers overflow and people and property can be trapped or simply washed away. Since 1998, more than 30 people have drowned in floods in Britain. Flooding in Bangladesh caused 1300 deaths in 1989, another natural disaster.

### .....and too little?

Another kind of natural disaster is a drought. This happens when there is no water, when it doesn't rain for a long time and rivers dry up. Plants, animals and even humans die as a result of drought, for we all need water to live. Many countries today suffer from drought. This causes crops to fail, animal to die and sadly, people to starve.

### Which is the most dangerous natural disaster?

All the disasters mentioned above are very dangerous and continue to kill thousands of people each year, but they are nowhere near the most dangerous disaster to ever happen on earth. One type of event in earth's history has regularly killed millions of beings; asteroid impacts. About once every million years the earth is hit by a piece of rock and ice from space large enough to cause massive destruction (including earthquakes, volcanoes and ice ages) and sometimes to kill entire species. 65 million years ago more than half the earth's species were killed by such an impact (including all the dinosaurs).

*Disasters on the earth may seem dangerous, but the biggest threat to humans is likely to come from space.*

### After reading

**Exercise 1:** Match the words from the table with the correct definitions.

Active	Asteroid	Cone	Drought	Fault line
Impact	Lava	Overflow	Tectonic plates	Tornado

1. Sections of the earth's surface
2. Hot liquid that erupts from volcanoes
3. A very fast spinning wind
4. When it doesn't rain for a very long time
5. Places on the earth where earthquakes are more common
6. One type of shape for a volcano
7. When there is too much water in a river
8. When a comet hits the earth with great force
9. When a volcano still has the possibility to erupt
10. A large piece of rock and ice floating in space

**More activities on this topic**

You'll find links to all the following activities connected to the theme of disasters at:

<http://www.britishcouncil.org/learnenglish-central-themes-natural-disasters.htm>

- **Word games: Natural disasters x 2.** Do you know the difference between a hurricane and a typhoon?
- **Poem: The Tay Bridge Disaster** The most famous poem from the worst poet in the English language!
- **Trivia:** Everything you (n)ever wanted to know about disasters.
- There are also a disaster-related cartoon, a poll, and carefully selected external links.

**Answers to comprehension activity:** 1. *Tectonic plates*; 2. *Lava*; 3. *Tornado*; 4. *Drought*; 5. *Fault line*; 6. *Cone*; 7. *Overflow*; 8. *Impact*; 9. *Active*; 10. *Asteroid*

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