National Geographic: Trailblazer ESL Materials

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Introduction

This report was drafted using the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education's High-Quality Next Generation ESL Instructional Materials (HQIM-NGESL) review process and rubric. The whole review process and rubric supports evaluation of:

- Whether materials provide a full year's worth of dedicated ESL instruction, as determined by the review panel and given the Massachusetts definition of ESL,
- Whether ESL instructional materials are aligned to the WIDA English Language Development Standards Framework, 2020 Edition (henceforth known as the ELD Framework) – and integrated with the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks, as determined by the review panel, and
- Quality of ESL instructional materials, as interpreted through the HQIM-NGESL rubric.

The full report features a summary of the results of a panel review of the materials. The review of the materials was done during the 2025-2026 convening of the HQIM-NGESL panel. The panel was comprised of Massachusetts district leaders, classroom educators, and representatives from higher education institutions. It is important to note that the report only summarizes the analysis of the Quality of the ESL instructional materials as interpreted through the HQIM-NGESL rubric. It does not guarantee the quality, scope, or thoroughness of the reviewed materials. It also does not endorse the use of the specific materials reviewed, but simply provides a summary of the information shared by the reviewing panel.

The HQIM-NGESL rubric is divided into two sections. Section A focuses on curricular structure and the coherence of the instructional materials for supporting a trajectory of learning for the year. Section B focuses on whether materials are student-centered and the intentional design of the materials for supporting multilingual learners. Each report:

- Opens with a brief description of the materials that is provided by the publisher or the district that submitted the materials for review,
- Includes a quick reference graphic of the ratings for each of the rubric criteria and a summary of the review of the materials, as described by the review panel, and
- Contains overall-level ratings for each of the rubric criteria, as determined by the review panel, and accompanied by descriptive strengths and challenges, and
- Information from the publisher, such as product specifications.

As you review the report, be sure to consider the following:

- The criteria in the rubric represent selected desired aspects of high quality in ESL materials. While comprehensive and useful for selecting, creating, and improving the quality of ESL instructional materials, the rubric is not, nor can it be, exhaustive. There may be additional criteria your evaluation team determines important to add, based on local needs, EL data, backgrounds, and educator

needs. Data may inform your creation of additional criteria and indicators in the evidence gathering process.

- The report can help teams determine whether they should adopt the ESL Instructional Materials, adopt the ESL Instructional Materials with supplemental guidance and materials to address gaps in quality, adopt materials and create a local plan to address gaps in quality, or to not adopt. HQIM-NGESL reports are only one component of a robust and transparent process to investigate and select high-quality instructional materials (HQIM) for your localized context. Explore our IMplement MA website to learn more about DESE's inclusive four-phase process, resources, and opportunities to support strong selection of high-quality instructional materials that is grounded in a shared vision, informed by localized equity priorities, and supported by diverse stakeholders.

The Overall Bottom Line

Section A: Curricular Structure
Alignment to MA Definition of ESL – 3
Curricular Map – 3
Unit Language Goals – 2
Lesson Objectives – 2
Assessment – 4
Functional Approach – 3
Shared Responsibility – 1

Section B – Student-centered Instructional Materials
Asset-based Orientation – 2
Linguistically Responsive – 1
Critical Stance – 3
Oral Language Development – 3
Formative Assessment – 3
Scaffolds and Supports – 4
Universal Design and Accessibility - 3

4: Evidence is clear and comprehensive; clear connection to four indicators
3: Evidence is present; clear connection to three indicators
2: Evidence is present but insufficient; clear connection to two indicators
0: Evidence is not sufficiently present; connection to one or fewer indicators

Summary of the Bottom Line
The National Geographic Trailblazer program demonstrates several strong features aligned to the HQIM-NGESL rubric, particularly in the areas of assessment, scaffolding, oral language development, and opportunities for critical thinking. The materials include robust teacher resources, multiple assessment types, structured language practice, and multimodal supports that promote English language development across domains. In particular, the materials provide opportunities for speaking, collaborative interaction, and explicit grammar and reading instruction.

At the same time, reviewers noted some areas that schools and districts using the materials may need to support educators around such as WIDA 2020 alignment, explicit unit-level language goals, linguistically responsive practices, and systems for collaboration between ESL and content educators. The panelists noted that some of the strengths of the materials were seen inconsistently across grade levels or rely on teacher interpretation and extension rather than being systematically embedded within the materials. The materials provide limited explicit support for home language development, language transfer, or multilingual identity development.

The Next Generation ESL Curriculum Review Rubric

Section A: Curricular Structure

Alignment to Massachusetts Definition of ESL – 3
Materials demonstrate clear alignment with the Massachusetts definition of ESL, integrating language development with grade-level content and the ELD Framework

Strengths: The Trailblazer materials demonstrate strong evidence of integrating language development within engaging disciplinary specific contexts. Units consistently develop language across domains—listening, speaking, reading, and writing—while embedding instruction within thematic contexts. For example, Unit 3 Level 1 incorporates informational writing tasks tied to authentic purposes and key language uses, supporting both academic and social language development. The materials also include essential questions and themes that promote global, textual, social, visual, and media literacy, providing meaningful contexts for language learning. Additionally, oral language activities are designed to support both academic and social communication, and the materials include correlations to Common Core State Standards and WIDA Key Language Uses through teacher resources and publisher reports.

Challenges: Despite these strengths, the materials do not fully align with the Massachusetts definition of ESL because of limited attention to some components of the WIDA 2020 framework. Reviewers noted a lack of evidence of explicit instruction at the discourse level and minimal integration of the language of mathematics. While materials are leveled according to proficiency descriptors, there is little indication of grade-level clustering or grade-specific expectations, which limits alignment with grade-level disciplinary learning. Furthermore, although WIDA Key Language Uses are referenced, the materials do not consistently demonstrate explicit alignment to broader WIDA standards or language expectations.

Bottom Line: Overall, Trailblazer demonstrates a strong foundation in integrating language and content instruction through engaging, contextualized learning experiences. However, educators using these materials may need to supplement the materials in relation to WIDA 2020 discourse-level instruction and disciplinary language development.

Curricular Map – 3
Materials Provide a clear, year-long curricular map that demonstrates a coherent progression of language development aligned with grade-level content.

Strengths: The curriculum provides pacing guides, unit sequencing, and spiraling instructional structures that support coherent language development over time. The use of recurring review lessons every two units helps reinforce previously taught concepts and deepen student understanding. Unit openers clearly frame instructional goals and provide purpose for learning, while embedded scaffolds such as visuals, sentence frames, word banks, and comprehensible input strategies support language acquisition throughout the materials. The materials also include opportunities for varied genres of writing aligned to different language purposes, such as opinion writing, informational writing, and descriptive text.

Challenges: Although the materials demonstrate spiraling instruction, reviewers noted that the spiraling is more evident across levels than within levels. Additionally, panelists noted limited evidence of how lesson and unit outcomes build toward annual language benchmarks, potentially limiting long-term coherence. The materials also lack evidence of explicit alignment to WIDA standards and provide little attention to language development in mathematics. Reviewers further noted that scaffolds are not always clearly connected to the spiraling of skills and knowledge, making it difficult to determine how supports intentionally deepen learning over time.

Bottom Line: Trailblazer offers a generally coherent curricular structure with pacing guides and recurring opportunities for review and reinforcement. However, schools and districts may need to provide additional professional development and guidance to ensure clearer alignment to annual benchmarks, more explicit WIDA integration, and stronger articulation of how scaffolds support long-term language development.

Unit Language Goals – 2
Materials present clearly defined unit-level language goals that integrate content standards with language development, providing a coherent focus of instruction over several weeks.

Strengths: The curriculum includes unit openers that frame instructional goals and establish broad learning purposes for each unit. Writing projects at the end of units also support purposeful language use and align with WIDA Key Language Uses, helping students apply language in meaningful contexts. Additionally, pacing guides provide a structure for accomplishing unit outcomes within reasonable instructional timelines.

Challenges: Reviewers consistently found that unit-level language goals were implied rather than explicitly stated. In many cases, what appeared to be unit goals were collections of lesson-level objectives rather than overarching language outcomes connected to broader standards. Materials also lacked clear alignment to WIDA Language Expectations and content standards outside of ELA. Some language objectives were overly broad or generic, such as “Understand and use new words,” which limited their instructional usefulness.

Bottom Line: While Trailblazer provides instructional direction and purposeful learning experiences, at times unit language goals appeared not to be explicitly or systematically aligned to WIDA expectations. Educators using these materials may need to clarify and strengthen overarching language goals to ensure coherent multi-week language development.

Lesson Objectives – 2
Materials provide clear, actionable lesson-level language objectives that directly support progress toward unit language goals and can be reasonably accomplished within a single lesson.

Strengths: The curriculum includes lesson-level objectives within teacher resources and lesson planners, particularly within grammar and reading lessons. Objectives are generally appropriate for daily instruction and support language practice across instructional routines. Lessons also incorporate formative assessments that encourage educators to monitor progress toward learning targets.

Challenges: Reviewers reported difficulty locating clear, measurable lesson language objectives throughout the materials. Many objectives relied on vague language such as "understand," making them difficult to measure. Additionally, lesson objectives were often identical to unit goals, limiting coherence between daily instruction and broader unit outcomes. Student-facing materials rarely displayed objectives directly, and teachers were not consistently prompted to make learning goals visible to students or encourage student self-assessment.

Bottom Line: Trailblazer includes instructional objectives within teacher materials, but the objectives lack clarity, measurability, and coherence across instructional levels. Schools and districts using these materials may need to provide additional guidance to make objectives actionable and transparent for students.

Assessment – 4
Materials include an assessment system that provides multiple opportunities to measure language growth, aligns with curriculum goals and standards, and informs long-term instructional planning.

Strengths: The panelists noted that the assessment system is a strength of the materials. Materials include self-assessments, project rubrics, formative assessments, placement tests, mid-term and end-of-unit assessments, and assessments across language domains. Lessons also include "Assessment for Learning" components and various formative assessment ideas to support instructional decision-making. The breadth of available assessments provides multiple opportunities for monitoring student progress and language growth over time.

Challenges: Although assessments are comprehensive, reviewers noted that guidance for administering and interpreting some assessments—particularly Gains and Cambridge assessments—was limited. Districts may need to provide additional professional development to help educators effectively implement and interpret these assessment systems.

Bottom Line: Trailblazer offers a robust and comprehensive assessment system with multiple opportunities to monitor language development. However, districts may need to supplement the materials with professional learning to maximize effective use of assessment data.

Functional Approach – 3
Materials implement a purpose-driven approach to language development that explicitly links language forms and functions to communicative goals across academic disciplines.

Strengths: The materials consistently incorporate purposeful language use through writing activities, explicit grammar instruction, reading strategies, and genre-focused instruction. Students engage with fiction, nonfiction, science, social studies, and poetry texts, helping connect language use to a variety of disciplinary contexts. Materials also demonstrate instruction across word, sentence, and discourse levels through genre studies and reading comprehension tasks.

Challenges: Despite evidence of purposeful language instruction, reviewers found limited evidence of explicit teacher guidance around the three dimensions of language and insufficient opportunities for students to analyze language choices based on audience and purpose. Additionally, teachers may need to supplement the materials to make stronger interdisciplinary connections more explicit.

Bottom Line: Trailblazer supports purposeful language instruction and disciplinary literacy, but additional teacher facilitation may be needed to deepen analysis of language choices and discourse-level instruction.

Shared Responsibility – 1
Materials promote shared expertise, responsibility, and accountability for students in the program.

Strengths: The curriculum includes pacing guides and lesson planning tools that could support collaborative organizational planning.

Challenges: Reviewers found almost no evidence of structures that support collaboration between ESL and content teachers. Materials appear designed primarily for standalone ESL instruction and lack evidence of systems for shared planning, data analysis, curriculum development, or collaborative monitoring of multilingual learner progress.

Bottom Line: Schools and districts implementing the curriculum may need to establish additional structures, protocols, and opportunities for ESL-content teacher collaboration.

Section B: Student-Centered Instructional Materials

Asset-based Orientation – 2
Materials consistently promote an asset-based approach, actively incorporating and building upon students' diverse backgrounds, languages, cultures, experiences, knowledge, and interests to enhance language development and content learning.

Strengths: The materials include opportunities for students to make text-to-self connections and draw on personal experiences in writing projects and discussions. Some activities encourage global literacy, reflection, and connections to students' lived experiences. Teacher resources occasionally prompt students to discuss their home lives and personal identities.

Challenges: Asset-based practices are inconsistently embedded across levels and units. There is minimal evidence of encouraging students to use home languages or develop multilingual identities explicitly. Reviewers noted that teachers may need to intentionally extend and deepen these opportunities to make them culturally and linguistically sustaining.

Bottom Line: Trailblazer demonstrates emerging asset-based practices through personal connections and global literacy themes, but implementation is inconsistent and may require intentional teacher facilitation and supplementing to fully leverage students' cultural and linguistic assets.

Linguistically Responsive – 1
Materials consistently promote linguistically responsive practices, actively supporting the use of students' full linguistic resources while facilitating English language development across all domains (listening, speaking, reading, and writing).

Strengths: Grammar instruction and vocabulary work support metalinguistic awareness, and bilingual word lists are available within teacher resources. Some teacher guidance encourages students to respond in their home language during discussions.

Challenges: The panelists noted minimal evidence of support for translanguaging, language transfer, or sustained home language development. The panelists also noted that in some places, students are explicitly directed to answer only in English. There is little evidence of cross-linguistic awareness instruction or strategies that actively leverage students' linguistic repertoires.

Bottom Line: Although Trailblazer includes limited supports for multilingual learners' home languages, schools and districts using these materials may need to provide professional development and guidance on linguistically responsive practices aligned with current research and multilingual pedagogy.

Critical Stance – 3
Materials consistently foster a critical stance, encouraging students to use language as a tool for inquiry, analysis, and action on issues relevant to their lives and communities.

Strengths: The materials support global literacy, social literacy, and critical thinking through discussions of meaningful topics and issues. Materials encourage students to connect texts to their own lives and communities, examine similarities and differences across cultures, and engage in reflective discussions that affirm identity and agency.

Challenges: While the materials promote inquiry and perspective-taking, reviewers found less evidence of explicit engagement with inequities, injustice, or advocacy-oriented action. Opportunities for deeper critical consciousness vary across units and levels.

Bottom Line: Trailblazer provides opportunities for students to foster inquiry, global awareness, and student voice, though opportunities for explicit critical examination of inequity and social justice are less consistently present.

Oral Language Development – 3
Materials provide daily, structured opportunities for all students to engage in meaningful oral interactions that develop listening and speaking skills for social and academic purposes.

Strengths: Oral language development is embedded throughout the instructional materials with frequent opportunities for discussion, partner work, and peer interaction. Speaking and listening activities appear in nearly every lesson, and unit openers encourage discussion of essential questions and topics. Activities also connect oral language to visual and multimodal learning experiences.

Challenges: Although oral interaction is frequent, many conversations remain relatively simple and lack explicit academic conversation structures or sustained discourse routines. Reviewers noted limited evidence of conversation moves that support extended academic dialogue.

Bottom Line: Trailblazer provides opportunities for oral language practice and peer interaction, but educators using these materials may need to provide additional supports for sustained academic discourse to strengthen oral language development.

Formative Assessment - 3
Materials integrate formative assessment practices throughout instruction, providing tools and strategies for teachers and students to monitor learning, adjust teaching, and support language growth in real time.

Strengths: The materials embed formative assessments throughout lessons through comprehension checks, partner activities, self-assessments, rubrics, and oral and written exercises. Teacher resources include guides for formative assessment practices, and Lexile measures are provided for readings to support instructional planning.

Challenges: Reviewers noted limited evidence of explicit guidance for providing actionable feedback aligned to language objectives. While opportunities for formative assessment are plentiful, teachers may need to be more intentional in using assessment information to guide instruction and provide targeted feedback.

Bottom Line: Trailblazer includes extensive formative assessment opportunities and tools, though clearer guidance on actionable feedback and instructional adjustment could strengthen implementation.

Scaffolds and Supports – 4
Materials provide a range of scaffolding strategies and supports that assist students in accessing grade-level content and developing language, with guidance on how to gradually remove supports as students gain proficiency.

Strengths: The materials offer a wide range of scaffolds, including sentence frames, word banks, visuals, graphic organizers, challenge activities, and mixed-ability instructional supports. Scaffolds are embedded within both student and teacher materials and support higher-order thinking alongside language acquisition.

Challenges: Panelists noted that scaffolds were not always explicitly connected to instructional goals or systematically explained within lessons. Additionally, panelists noted a lack of evidence of guidance on how scaffolds should be gradually removed as proficiency increases.

Bottom Line: Trailblazer provides a range of instructional scaffolds and supports that promote language access and engagement. Schools and districts using these materials may need to provide additional guidance around implementation and gradual release of supports as students gain proficiency.

Universal Design and Accessibility – 3
Materials provide varied means for accessing the content and demonstrating learning, helping teachers meet the diverse needs and abilities of a variety of students, including those with different abilities and those working above or below grade level.

Strengths: The materials include multimodal supports such as text-to-speech features, visual literacy tasks, before/during/after reading strategies, oral interaction opportunities, and varied ways for students to demonstrate understanding. Student-facing materials support engagement through visual, auditory, and interactive learning experiences.

Challenges: Despite these features, reviewers found limited evidence of intentional alignment to the Universal Design for Learning framework or differentiation for students with IEPs. Opportunities for student choice were also somewhat limited, particularly at earlier proficiency levels.

Bottom Line: Trailblazer includes several accessible and multimodal instructional features, but schools and districts using the materials may need to provide explicit guidance for supporting students with diverse learning needs.