## **Critical Stance and Social Justice in the Next Generation ESL Curriculum Project**

At the outset of the Next Generation ESL (NGESL) Curriculum Project, the Planning Committee decided to develop model units that explicitly strengthened student agency and critical stance. This priority is reflected the NGESL Theory of Action and meant NGESL Model Curriculum Units (MCUs) would incorporating student identities, backgrounds, prior knowledge, and experiences. Thus, NGESL tools, resources, and model units provide opportunities for students to actively engage in learning as critical thinkers who evaluate information and attitudes and make choices and effect change.

In practice this means the model units provide students with opportunities to gather information, question, and address real-world issues affecting them and their communities. They prompt ELs to investigate authentic critical issues as context for language development and promote deep understanding and transfer of what students learn through the Curriculum Embedded Performance Assessment (CEPA).

In this way, NGESL ESL curriculum encompasses three frameworks:

1. **A student-centered framework**, in which student background, experience, and prior knowledge drive contingent pedagogy reflected in the curricular design.
2. **A sociocultural framework** that acknowledges that language is built within each unique sociocultural context.
3. **A critical framework** in which students use higher-order thinking to question existing situations and perspectives and use knowledge and language as tools to make choices, in action, to pose solutions.

In the NGESL MCUs, these three frameworks intersect as follows:

* **The UbD enduring understandings and transfer goals provide for student agency and independent transfer of language learning to new contexts.** Unit development processes guide the curriculum toward independent transfer goals that allow for demonstration of understanding and learning in new contexts or with authentic problems students will solve using their language and critical lenses. This expectation is inherent in the [Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks](https://www.doe.mass.edu/frameworks/current.html), the [WIDA English Language Development Standards Framework, 2020 Edition](https://wida.wisc.edu/sites/default/files/resource/WIDA-ELD-Standards-Framework-2020.pdf), and current initiatives supporting college and career readiness.
* **The CEPA, curricular tasks, and investigations connect to social justice and using language to take action.** CEPAs provide the opportunity to use new language to investigate and address topics in social justice or to apply learning to a real-world problem that is within students’ sphere of influence. Throughout the units, students explore language as a powerful vehicle in learning about concepts; engaging in cross-disciplinary analytic practices; and fortifying their critical lenses and agency to make choices, interact with their environment, and when necessary, influence change. caution educators to maintain an awareness of the necessary balance between knowledge and action, so that insufficiently informed engagement in social justice does not serve to reproduce the very problems it seeks to disrupt (North 2008).
* **A curriculum should be student-centered and contextualized.** Students’ prior knowledge and experiences are analyzed as the starting point for curriculum development during the collaboration phase of next generation ESL, and throughout a unit as planned curriculum trajectories merge with dynamic and contingent pedagogy, informed by student learning. Throughout the next generation ESL curriculum development process, at unit and lesson levels, the teacher systematically analyzes and plans around sociocultural contexts and implications and begins curricular design from what students can do. This culturally responsive approach recognizes students’ identities and acknowledges their languages, cultures, experiences, perspectives, and prior knowledge as assets to the learning process.
* **Multiple perspectives and multiple modalities build critical lenses.** Educators are encouraged to incorporate UDL guidelines to provide multiple means of engagement, action and expression, and representation in curricular design. The addition of multiple culturally sustaining resources and perspectives ensures that students can safely investigate, discuss, question, and understand concepts and stances. Students are poised as partners in the learning process, responsible for self-assessment and monitoring. This dynamic aspect of curricular contextualization to student lives and experience, active student ownership of learning process, and recognition of multiple perspectives helps students to understand their own identities, values, beliefs, and perspectives while building critical lenses to understand others.

Many aspects of critical stance in the NGESL MCUs become more visible as the units and lessons are implemented and enacted in instructional practice, and in both planned and spontaneous interactions between students and teachers. Educators are encouraged to design language curricula that engender the kinds of contexts, performance tasks, and practices that lead to student development of critical lenses, agency, and achievement. The section below highlights one example of how critical stance appear in NGESL MCUs.

## **Elements of Critical Stance in One ESL MCU: Access to Clean Water**

* **Language development integrated with grade-level standards and practice expectations.** Grade-level standards and academic practices (e.g., stating opinions and claims) are inherently included in the design of the unit, as context for FLGs. The context for language use supports students in reading, writing, listening, and speaking about an issue of global interest and need, as they use language to learn about the issue and pose a solution.
* **Variety and choice.** Students choose from a variety of materials to access information (e.g., video, books, abridged articles, images, charts). Choice builds agency and provides access to different perspectives.
* **Linguistic and cultural resources of students.** Students' first languages are valued and tapped as resources for learning new academic language in English. Students are encouraged to use their multi-lingual resources and knowledge to learn. They refer to bilingual resources (e.g., bilingual dictionaries, cognate charts) and use first language with peers to clarify concepts and bridge concepts between first language and English.
* **Multiple perspectives.** Educators are encouraged to design units that include multiple voices and perspectives, through discussion, texts, and research aimed at informing and addressing issues of sociopolitical importance, such as access to clean water. Students should be given ample opportunity to engage with texts, images, discussion of experiences, websites, videos, and other resources focused on the context of access to clean water, all the while building toward the FLGs in the unit.
* **Sociocultural context analysis.** Sociocultural perspectives and considerations drive curricular design. Register, genres, text types, topics, tasks, relationships, social roles, and the experiences of students (e.g., potential unfamiliarity with cultural norms of a PSA, or prior experience with access to clean water) should be analyzed as part of the planning for language development.
* **Multiple modalities, supports, and scaffolding.** Students read, write, draw, listen. and discuss, using a combination of their senses and all linguistic resources that support learning. Multiple means of engagement, representation, and action and expression are incorporated into the unit with supports (e.g., whiteboards, turn-and-talk, help from the teacher, pointing, gestures, independent thinking time, group discussion). Universal Design for Learning (UDL) guidelines and language scaffolds can help remove barriers to learning and optimize access and participation.
* **Differentiated and student-centered.** The final product of units is performance-based and differentiated with appropriate supports for the language development needs of students at different proficiency levels. With the open-ended CEPA in the form of a public service announcement, students have multiple ways of representing new learning and new perspectives while using language to persuade others and cause change.
* **Independent action and transfer.** In next generation ESL, students are positioned to make original contributions to learning tasks. Learning tasks lead to products and performances requiring students to use complex thinking skills; apply language forms and functions within new contexts; and synthesize multiple materials, unit learning experiences, and perspectives.
* **Student ownership.** Students are consciously engaged in taking ownership of their learning; learning tasks invite them to reflect on academic concepts and use new language with real-world authentic applications. Goals and criteria for success are visible and jointly owned by teacher and student. The assessment process throughout the unit includes various forms of student self-assessment and monitoring.
* **Questioning.** Students reflect and focus upon the implications of maintaining or changing how things are done in learning or life. Students ask “why” questions and explore “what if” scenarios to understand the rationale behind concepts related to accessing clean water in the world. In planning this aspect of the unit, NGESL MCU writing teams drew on the Understanding by Design (UbD) “[W.H.E.R.E.T.O](https://static.pdesas.org/content/documents/WHERETO.pdf).” and “[GRASP](https://teachingcommons.unt.edu/teaching-essentials/course-design/grasps-model-meaningful-assessment)” approaches.

All educators contribute, in their respective roles, to building the identities, critical stance, and agency of ELs. Language experts, in particular, bring expertise related to the interconnected aspects of language, culture, and content in curricula, instruction, and assessment. Attending to student agency and building critical stance requires that all of these considerations be intentionally woven into curricular design and enacted through instructional practices in the classroom.

## **Additional Resources Focused on Social Justice and Critical Stance in Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment**

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Westerlund, R. (2015, March 13). [What does language have to do with social justice?](https://reclaimingthelanguage.wordpress.com/2015/03/13/what-does-language-have-to-do-with-social-justice/) *Reclaiming the language for social justice* [Web log entry]. March 13, 2015. Retrieved November 20, 2015.

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