The Next Generation ESL (NGESL) Curriculum Project developed an approach, process, and tools for developing ESL units and lessons based on the NGESL Theory of Action and curriculum characteristics. It also led to the development of NGESL Model Curriculum Units (MCUs). This document dives deeper into sociocultural implications, a key consideration for educators seeking to develop curriculum following the NGESL approach. It provides definitions and guiding prompts that can help keep sociocultural aspects in mind during unit and lesson planning. To learn more about the NGESL Curriculum Project, check out Section 1 of the NGESL Resource Guide.

## **Sociocultural Implications**

All curricula, especially for English learners (ELs), must be designed with the sociocultural context in mind. This involves thinking about the interaction of the student (including his or her identity, knowledge, culture, proficiency in English and home languages, literacy level, academic readiness, beliefs, values, and experiences) with the given academic contexts (including register, genre/text type, topic, and task/situation, andthe student’s relationship to other participants’ identities and social roles). In fact, language itself invokes a sociocultural context and provides a setting for further expression of ideas.

Within currently developed NGESL MCUs, academic environments for learning language may present new sociocultural contexts for students, each with its own rules, expectations, behaviors, registers, tools, symbols, and technologies that are not always familiar or obvious to ELs. Educators need to carefully consider these aspects of curricular design to make implicit cultural and linguistic expectations are more explicit and ensure student engagement in learning.

Educators must think about the cultural nuances, ethnocentrisms, or assumptions associated with the academic language, content context, or academic practice expected in a unit. In addition, educators should consider different ways ELs might express concepts and skills embedded in the unit, and then provide for multiple pathways for student engagement, representation of knowledge, and expression.[[1]](#footnote-1)

## **Definitions, Guiding Prompts and Examples from ESL MCUs**

The following chart, adapted from WIDA trainings delivered in Massachusetts, prompts the teacher to think about language as sociocultural context for guiding curriculum, instruction, and assessment.

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| --- | --- |
| **Register** | *Register* refers to the different ways in which language is used and how it varies depending on who is part of the communication.  Questions to consider:   * Who is the audience? * Is communication formal or informal? * How does the language change depending on who is in the conversation? How do people in the conversation shape the language choices used to communicate? * What prior experiences with this register can we capitalize on? |
| **Genre/text type** | *Genre* refers to the specific and particular type(s) of text or discourse and its particular purposes. For example, students engage in different genres when participating in group interactions in the library and participating in a Socratic seminar in the classroom. Likewise, different genres are at play in a math textbook and a social studies primary source.  Questions to consider:   * What is the subject matter? * How is language used and organized in that subject matter/topic? * What may be new or unfamiliar to students about this particular genre or text type? |
| **Topic** | *Topic* refers to the theme or content in which learning takes place. For example, one ESL MCU focuses on the language used to describe animals and their habitats while another focuses on language used to write newspaper articles.  Questions to consider:   * What is the topic of the conversation, text, or task? What is it about? * What might be new/unfamiliar about the topic? * What prior experiences might students have with this topic? |
| **Task/situation** | *Task* or *situation* refers to the specific activity that elicits the processing or production of language. For example, the task of creating a PSA on an issue related to clean water access requires more specialized language than the language needed to participate in an informal conversation where students brainstorm ways they use water every day with a small group.  Questions to consider:   * What type of language does this task or situation require? Formal? Informal? Technical? * What is the purpose for using language in this particular task? * What social norms affect this task and what supports might students need? |
| **Identities/social roles** | *Identities* and *social roles* refer to the positioning of the learner within learning environment, in a situation, or among other people. The use of language changes based on the speaker’s identity and social role of the speakers, the situation, and the register. For example, notions of how one should interact with a teacher can vary across cultures.  Questions to consider:   * How is the environment organized? * How is the role of the participant communicated or implied? * How does the language change depending on who is speaking? How might the curriculum acknowledge students’ cultures and identities? * How are students expected to communicate? In what ways will their identity influence their use of language? * Will students assume new roles during the communication? Are they prepared to do so? * What roles and identities are students being asked to take, and how does that bring into focus the purpose for using language? For example, are students being asked to take on the role of scientists, mathematicians, critical thinkers, problem solvers, innovators, citizens, entrepreneurs, etc.? |

Sample sociocultural implications related to existing ESL MCUs include:

* **Register:** Delivering an oral presentation to the whole class may be a new concept for certain ELs, so this could be a new role for them.
* **Topic:** Animals are valued differently in different cultures. Also, depending on the history and region from which students come, particular topics may evoke strong emotional responses.
* **Task/situation:** Some students may be more comfortable expressing themselves in words, short phrases, or simple sentences.
* Some students may need explicit instruction in classroom culture/climate, as well as common instructional activities used in American classrooms such as partner work, small group work, whole class discussion, and individual presentation.
* **Identities and social roles:** Some students may not be familiar with American cultural norms of turn-taking and classroom conversation etiquette. Like most students, ELs may need direct instruction to acquire academic conversation skills and roles.

1. For more information about multiple means of engagement, representation, and action and expression, see [Universal Design for Learning](http://www.cast.org/our-work/about-udl.html#.VuB8SdB8mbs). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)