What is this research about?

One of the current graduation requirements in Ontario is the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test (OSSLT). The OSSLT is a cross-curricular literacy test that takes five hours to complete, half of it is about reading and the other about writing. It is a standardized test that all students must take and pass before they are able to graduate. Most students take the test in grade 10, although some wait another year or two to write the test if they do not feel ready.

Results from Cheng, Kinger and Zheng’s (2007) research indicates that students who have English as a second language (ESL) and those developing their English language skills (ELD) have lower levels of success and higher deferral rates for the OSSLT than other students in Ontario. ESL/ELD students also drop out of high school at higher rates than non-ESL/ELD students.

Determining how and why ESL/ELD students have difficulty with the OSSLT is

What you need to know

English as a Second Language (ESL) and English Language Development (ELD) students do not perform as well as non-ESL/ELD students on the OSSLT, leading to lower graduation rates for those students. The number of ESL/ELD students in Ontario is increasing, although funding and support for them has been decreasing over the last few years, which means that educators need as much specific information as possible about how to better support ESL/ELD students to succeed.

This study compared results of ESL/ELD students and non-ESL/ELD students on the 2002 and 2003 OSSLT (which is typically administered in grade 10). Findings indicate that ESL/ELD students perform on average 20% lower than non-ESL/ELD students and have the most trouble with reading narrative, indirect understanding, reading vocabulary and news report writing style.
an increasingly important task as each year the number of ESL/ELD students in Ontario public schools grows, which means there is an increasing number of students failing or deferring the OSSLT.

Also, although the number of ELS/ELD students is increasing, the amount of funding and support for ESL/ELD students has been decreasing over the last few years.

The purpose of this study was to see if there were any significant and systematic differences (based on success on different parts of the test) between ESL/ELD and non-ESL/ELD students that could help explain the higher failure rate of ESL/ELD students or provide ideas for what teachers and administrators could focus on when preparing ESL/ELD students for the OSSLT to increase their chances of success.

What did the researchers do?
Results from the OSSLT were gathered for 2002 and 2003. The sample for the 2002 results included 2686 ESL/ELD students and 4068 non-ESL/ELD students (a stratified random sample). The sample for the 2003 results included 3635 ESL/ELD students and 5003 non-ESL/ELD students (both groups only included students who were first time eligible – had not deferred writing the test before). From the reading component of the test the researchers looked at item formats (multiple choice, constructed response and constructed response with explanation), text types, skills and strategies. For the writing component the researchers looked at the number of students who got each level of score (from 0-4) on the four writing tasks (summary, opinion, news report and information). The researchers calculated descriptive statistics to show the pattern or how the item level responses were spread out, to indicate the relationship between responses and performance for the different sample groups.

Discrimination analysis was used to help determine which variables (item formats, text types, etc.) were associated with membership in either ESL/ELD or non-ESL/ELD groups.

What did the researchers find?
ESL/ELD students were found to have significantly lower test scores than non-ESL/ELD students in both years (approximately 20% lower).

Performance on reading constructs did not appear related to item formats, text types, skills, strategies and writing tasks for ESL/ELD and non-ESL/ELD students, which means that item format (multiple choice, constructed response and...
constructed response with an explanation) cannot be used to help determine performance of ESL/ELD students.

Some performance differences were associated with group membership (ESL/ELD or non-ESL/ELD). Lower performance on questions about narrative reading (text type), indirect understanding (reading skill) and vocabulary (reading strategy) were related to membership in the ESL/ELD group. This suggests that students who are ESL/ELD are more likely than non-ESL/ELD students to have a harder time with narrative reading, indirect understanding of reading material and reading vocabulary. ESL/ELD students also had more difficulty with the news reports writing task.

Performance on the OSSLT improved from 2002 to 2003 for both groups of students.

**How can you use this research**

The findings from this study can be used to help determine how and what ESL/ELD students should be taught to help them further develop their literacy skills, achieve higher scores on the OSSLT and increase their rate of graduation.

The researchers found that the parts of the test that ESL/ELD students had the most difficulty with were largely related to culture and context, abstract thinking and vocabulary.

Helping ESL/ELD students increase their knowledge of culture and context in Ontario can be achieved through teaching about Ontario and Canada in a variety of ways, including using visual materials.

In order to strengthen all skills ESL/ELD students would benefit from a greater focus on reading and writing skills and expanding their use and understanding of vocabulary.

**About the Researchers?**

Liying Cheng, is Professor and Director of the Assessment and Evaluation Group (AEG) at the Faculty of Education, Queen’s University. Her primary research interests are the impact of large-scale testing on instruction, the relationship between classroom assessment and instruction, and the academic and professional acculturation of international and new immigrant students, workers, and professionals to Canada. She conducts the majority of her research within the context of teaching and learning English as a second/foreign language (including immersion and bilingual contexts).

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Ying Zheng completed her M. Ed. and Ph.D. at the Faculty of Education, Queen’s University. She currently works as a Director of Research and Psychometrician in the Language Testing Division of Pearson, London, UK. Her research interests include psychometric analysis of large scale language testing data, English as second/foreign language learner characteristics, and quantitative research methodology.

References

Keywords
English as a Second Language (ESL), English Language Development (ELD), Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test (OSSLT), test performance

About this summary
The Ontario Education Research Exchange (OERE) is a project of the Knowledge Network for Applied Education Research, an Ontario network promoting the use of research in education. The OERE’s clear language summaries of academic research aim to support this mandate.

This summary reflects findings from this study only and is not necessarily representative of the broader body of literature on this subject. Please consult the original document for complete details about this research. In case of any disagreement, the original document should be understood as authoritative.

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