High-Stakes Tests and Applied Learners: The (Dis)connections Between Curriculum Expectations and Exam Notions of "Literacy"

Claire Ahn, Nathan Rickey, Alexandra Minuk, Jane Chin & Rebecca Luce-Kapler
Queen's University

Abstract:
In 2019, 59% of applied English learners failed the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test (OSSLT), which is a requirement to graduate high school in Ontario. The authors of this paper wondered about the 41% who passed. We asked: What curricular connections are being made (or not made)? What is working well? With these questions in mind, the purpose of this article is to share findings from a thematic analysis of literature focusing on applied learners and the OSSLT. Discussions also include findings from a survey that shares the perspectives and experiences of English educators who support students in their applied classrooms on the OSSLT. Findings show a disconnect between curricular and OSSLT assessment expectations of what is considered and valued as *literacy*. This article highlights a greater need to find and develop best practices for teaching learners in applied English classrooms and for sharing these evidence-based strategies. Such best practices can help educators further support students in applied English classroom to better prepare for the OSSLT which might also inform curriculum development, literacy instruction and standardized testing.

Keywords: applied English classrooms; high stakes exams; curriculum; literacy; assessment; Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test

Tests à enjeux élevés et les élèves du programme appliqués : (Dé)connexions entre les attentes curriculaires et les conceptions de la *« littératie »* dans les examens

Résumé :
En 2019, 59 % des apprenants inscrits dans les cours d'anglais appliqués ont échoué au Test provincial de compétences linguistiques de l'Ontario (TPCL) une exigence pour l'obtention d'un diplôme d'études secondaires dans la province. Les auteurs se sont interrogés sur les 41 % d'élèves qui ont réussi cet examen. Nous nous sommes posés les questions suivantes : Quels liens curriculaires sont (ou ne sont pas) établis ? Qu'est-ce qui fonctionne bien ? C'est dans cet optique que nous présentons les résultats d'une analyse thématique de la littérature portant sur les apprenants appliqués et le TPCL. L'article intègre également les résultats d'un sondage recueillant les perspectives et les expériences des enseignants·e·s d'anglais qui accompagnent les élèves dans leurs classes appliquées en vue de la réussite au TPCL. Les résultats révèlent qu'il y a un écart entre les attentes curriculaires et celles de l'évaluation standardisée du TPCL quant à ce qui est considéré et valorisé comme *littératie*. Cet article souligne la nécessité accrue d'identifier et de développer des pratiques exemplaires pour l'enseignement dans les classes d'anglais appliqué, et de diffuser ces stratégies fondées sur des données probantes. Ces pratiques exemplaires peuvent contribuer à mieux appuyer les enseignant·e·s à soutenir les élèves dans ces classes, à les préparer plus efficacement au TPCL, et potentiellement à développer le curriculum, l'enseignement de la littératie et la conception des évaluations standardisées.

Mots clés : classes d'anglais appliqué; examens à enjeux élevés; curriculum; littératie; évaluation; Test de littératie des écoles secondaires de l'Ontario

In Ontario, all Grade 10 students in applied and academic English classes are required to meet the provincial literacy requirement to receive their Ontario Secondary School Diploma and graduate high school. The primary way in which this is done is by writing and passing (with a grade of 75%) the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test (OSSLT), a high-stakes exam. In Ontario, secondary core subject classes are streamed as academic or applied. As the stream titles imply, curricula related to applied courses are intended to teach students more practical skills while the academic courses are intended to engage students in more abstract or theoretical concepts. The latter stream of courses is often required for entry into most universities. Unlike other provinces (e.g., Alberta) where there is one version of an exam for applied students and another for academic, in Ontario students in both applied and academic streams of English are required to successfully complete the same OSSLT exam. For several reasons, many students in applied English classes are not successful in passing the OSSLT. The most recent available results (at the time of writing this article) from 2019 show that 59% of applied level learners did not pass the OSSLT compared to only 9% of their counterparts in academic English classes. While 59% of applied learners failed the OSSLT, the authors of this paper wondered about the 41% who passed. We wondered: What curricular connections were being made (or not made) that made one group successful and the other not? What supports and strategies were being implemented in classrooms that best supported the development of literacy skills? Considering this 59% who failed their first attempt, we assumed that there must be English educators or even entire schools or school boards who employed successful instructional strategies with learners in the applied stream that enabled them to pass the OSSLT on their first attempt.

As such, the purpose of this paper is to share common practices and teaching perspectives related to supporting success on the OSSLT by learners in the applied stream. Leveraging an extensive thematic analysis of relevant literature and survey results of secondary applied English teachers in Ontario, we begin by articulating the theoretical foundations needed to investigate successful instructional approaches when it comes to the development and testing of "literacy". We provide a summary of the methodology and data analysis followed by a discussion of our key findings and our concluding thoughts.

Background of the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test (OSSLT)

To provide some context, what follows is a brief overview of the evolution of the OSSLT. The OSSLT was first introduced in 2002 by the Education, Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) as a way to measure students' standard literacy skills across all subject areas (EQAO, 2013). The OSSLT framework provided the following definition of literacy to underpin the test:

> For the purpose of the OSSLT, literacy comprises the reading and writing skills required to understand reading selections and to communicate through a variety of written forms as expected in The Ontario Curriculum across all subjects up to the end of Grade 9. (EQAO, 2022, p. 1)

If students fail the OSSLT, they are able to retake the test the following year. If students do not pass the second time, they are required to complete the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Course

(OSSLC) and its associated portfolio component in order to pass (Quigley, 2011). This means that it can potentially take a student three terms or more to complete the literacy requirement for graduation.

While the evolution of the exam itself has shifted since its introduction, the most recent version of the exam (at the time of our research), included five reading prompts involving different types of texts: an informational paragraph, a news report, a dialogue, a real-life narrative and a graphic text that corresponded with 31 multiple-choice questions and four open-ended written questions. The exam also included four writing tasks that required students to write a one-page news report, a two-page opinion piece and two short written responses, plus eight multiple-choice questions related to writing (Quigley, 2011).

A more recent, fully online version of the exam was released in March 2021, and it was divided into two parts or sessions. The online version of the OSSLT is what is used now for students to complete the exam. Session A consists of two reading passages followed by 13 multiple-select questions and one writing prompt that requires a 100-word open-ended response. Session B contains one reading passage followed by five multiple-select questions, one writing-related question followed by eight multiple-select questions and one writing prompt requiring a 500-word open-ended response (EQAO, 2021). The reasons for these more recent changes to the OSSLT are not clear. At the time, EQAO hosted a webinar about the newest version of the OSSLT to speak to the changes. However, attendees were only directed to the OSSLT framework for references informing these changes, but this document only reiterated the purpose of the OSSLT and did not provide any reasons for the changes. This quiet change of the OSSLT and the unclear reasons for why it was done are of concern; however, a close analysis of the different versions of the OSSLT is beyond the scope of this paper. This said, it is worth considering how the change to the structure of the exam may affect learners in the applied stream and if relevant, what connections exist between it and the curriculum.

Methodology

For our research, we employed a case study methodology. According to Yin (2009), case studies often ask "when", "how" or "why" questions. For the purpose of our study, we were interested in further understanding how English students in the applied stream were successfully passing the OSSLT and how educators were successfully helping these students develop their literacy skills overall to pass the OSSLT.

Our study was conducted in two phases. In the first phase, we conducted a deep dive and thematic analysis of the literature to see what studies had been conducted on topics related to the OSSLT and to determine if any focussed on best practices. The second phase included developing and disseminating a survey to learn more from current, practicing English teachers in Ontario and their perspectives and experiences in preparing students in the applied stream for the OSSLT.

The following section provides an overview of the processes we used for both data collection and analysis for both the literature and surveys.

Article Data Collection and Analysis Procedure

Articles were selected through iterative searches in two databases: Education Resources Information Centre (ERIC) and EBSCOHost. We determined there was no need to extend our search into other databases because together both provided access to a large number of peer-reviewed articles related to this research, which will be described in more detail below. The date range was set between 2000–2020 with the aim of returning results that were relevant from the time of the introduction of the OSSLT to the more current educational context.

The first phase involved searching keywords and keyword combinations in both databases (see Tables 1 and 2). Keyword combinations made use of the Boolean operator 'AND' to construct phrases such as Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test AND English AND OSSLT AND English. Additionally, the term 'Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test' was enclosed in quotation marks so that the search would return results pertinent to the entire phrase rather than individual words. Between both databases, searches yielded 252 results. To refine these results, the second phase of the search involved adding the Boolean operator 'NOT' and the keywords ESL (English as a Second Language) and ELL (English Language Learners). While research that focuses on supporting English Language Learners is of great importance and interest, it was not the primary focus of our study, as the applied English classroom is much more diverse than just considering ESL students. After adjusting our search terms to exclude ESL and ELL results, we applied the limiters 'peer-reviewed' and 'full-text' and filtered the language to English. The second search yielded 47 results. Once the authors sifted through the results and accounted for overlap among the different databases and searches, 14 articles remained. The authors then carefully examined the citations of each article and were able to add three articles previously unidentified that were relevant to the purpose of our research. This brought our article total to 17 (see Table 3).

Table 1

Keywords and Total Results

Keywords	Total Results
OSSLT	77
'Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test'	105
'Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test' AND English	40
OSSLT AND English	30
OSSLT AND English NOT ELL	27
OSSLT AND English NOT ESL	19
'Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test' AND English NOT ELL	37
'Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test' AND English NOT ESL	47

Table 2

Keywords and Total Results by Database

	Total Results by Database	
Keywords	EBSCOHost	ERIC
OSSLT	62	15
'Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test'	85	20
'Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test' AND English	27	13
OSSLT AND English	20	10
OSSLT AND English NOT ELL	18	9
OSSLT AND English NOT ESL	12	7
'Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test' AND English NOT ELL	25	12
'Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test' AND English NOT ESL	15	32

Table 3

Included Articles

Authors	Year	Title	Journal
Luce-Kapler & Klinger	2005	Uneasy writing: The defining moments of high-stakes literacy testing	Assessing Writing
Klinger & Luce-Kapler	2007	Walking in their shoes: Students' perceptions of large-scale high-stakes testing	Canadian Journal of Program Evaluation
Merchant et al.	2020	The enactment of applied English	Canadian Journal of Education
Brackenreed	2004	Teacher's perceptions of the effects of testing accommodations.	Exceptionality Education Canada
Cheng et al.	2007	Student accounts of the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test: A case for validation.	Canadian Modern Language Review
Cheng et al.	2009	Examining students' after-school literacy activities and their literacy performance on the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test.	Canadian Journal of Education
Denomme & Childs	2008	Does Ontario have an achievement gap? The challenge of comparing the performance of students in French- and English-language schools on national and international assessments.	Canadian Journal of Educational Administration and Policy

Authors	Year	Title	Journal
Doe et al.	2011	What has experience got to do with it? An exploration of L1 and L2 Test takers' perceptions of test performance and alignment to classroom literacy activities.	Canadian Journal of Education
Fox & Cheng	2007	Did we take the same test? Differing accounts of the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test by first and second language test-takers.	Assessment in Education
Kearns	2011	High-stakes standardized testing and marginalized youth: An examination of the impact on those who fail.	Canadian Journal of Education
Kearns	2016	The construction of 'illiterate' and 'literate' youth: The effects of high-stakes standardized literacy testing.	Race, Ethnicity and Education
Klinger et al.	2006	Contextual and school factors associated with achievement on a high-stakes examination.	Canadian Journal of Education
Marshall & Gibbons	2018	Assessing English: A Comparison between Canada and England's assessment procedures.	Education Sciences
Slomp	2005	Teaching and assessing language skills: Defining the knowledge that matters.	English Teaching: Practice and Critique
Van de Wal & Ryan	2014	Student perceptions of literacy after the Ontario secondary literacy course: A qualitative inquiry.	Brock Education: A Journal of Educational Research and Practice
White	2007	Are girls better readers than boys? Which boys? Which girls?	Canadian Journal of Education
Zheng et al.	2011	Test-takers' background, literacy activities, and views of the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test.	Alberta Journal of Educational Research

The analysis procedure for the articles involved an inductive thematic analysis using the NVivo software tool. Following Creswell's (2007, 2014) phases, we first categorized the articles by themes. We then refined these categories through a descriptive analysis that helped to identify relevance to the context of the applied English classroom and the OSSLT. From the categories, we further

analyzed and refined the themes to yield four main themes: 1) equity in education and the achievement gap; 2) alignment between in-class activities and the test experience; 3) students' experiences with literacy leading up to and during the test; and 4) non-literacy objectives of the test and test validity.

Survey Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

The four themes resulting from the analysis of the literature helped to inform the questions we asked in the second part of the study—the survey phase—to conduct a deeper examination of secondary applied English teachers' perspectives and experiences in successfully preparing their students for the OSSLT. Participants were recruited via social media and emails in the authors' networks and followed by snowball sampling. Participants included current, practicing secondary English teachers in Ontario who had experience or were currently teaching Grade 10 applied English (n=141).

The survey asked background questions about participants' years of teaching experience, subjects taught, etc. It went on to ask specific questions about what kind of supports participants implement, such as resources found through web searches, support personnel, or the creation of their own resources. It also asked whether educators were aware of the resources created by the Ministry of Ontario and, if so, whether they used them. There were a total of 21 questions, 19 multiple-choice or multiple-select questions and 2 open-ended questions.

From the data collected, a descriptive statistic analysis was conducted with the multiple-choice-type questions and an inductive thematic analysis was conducted on the open responses. Following a general inductive approach, the authors engaged in iterative cycles of coding and generated multiple interpretations of the data until a consensual interpretation emerged (Thomas, 2006). Findings from the survey that aligned with the literature included a) alignment between the test and in-class activities, and b) the test experience.

Findings

What follows is a discussion of the themes that were common from both data sets—alignment between in-class activities and the test experience—including, but not limited to, instructional strategies, resources and curriculum versus exam expectations of "literacy".

Instructional Strategies

From the literature, it is clear there is a discrepancy between how teachers prepare their students for the OSSLT and the actual testing experience (Kearns, 2011, 2016; Merchant et al., 2020). Like Kearns' (2011) participants, which included marginalized youth who had a wide range of schooling experiences and backgrounds, we also found a "real difference between classroom literacy and standardized test literacy" (p. 120). Kearns reported that many of the youth "were surprised and even shocked to find out that they were not up to the government standard of literacy" (p. 118). One participant noted how she did not understand how she failed the OSSLT because she "felt confident" and was "good in English" (p. 118). She also reported that she "felt she was successful in her applied

level English classes [and] had a good grasp of the curriculum" (p. 118). Yet, there was an obvious disconnect between the students' in-class experiences developing their literacy skills and the actual testing of these skills. Most youth in Kearns' (2011) study also reported "experienc[ing] meaningful literacy opportunities in English classrooms" and further noted that the OSSLT was not an accurate indicator of what "makes students good at reading and writing" (p. 120). These findings, among others, highlight a clear discrepancy between the classroom literacy experiences of students in the applied stream and what was tested.

Participants in Van de Wal and Ryan's (2014) research repeatedly credited the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Course (OSSLC) for student successes in literacy learning leading them to call for early research-informed intervention starting in Grade 9. While the authors of this paper agree with the importance of early intervention, at this current time students can only enrol in the OSSLC after they have already failed the OSSLT the first time. By adopting best practices sooner, teachers can potentially spare students the experience of failure of the OSSLT and generally, its associated feelings of shame and embarrassment (Kearns, 2011, 2016).

Resources

As the literature did not yield much information about literacy resources used to prepare students for the OSSLT, we included questions related to resources used in the survey. When asked about how much time teachers spend preparing students for the OSSLT, 30% of participants indicated they do so year-round, with 33% indicating they focus on much of the preparation one month prior to the exam date. Nearly 59% of participants noted they find and use resources on professional learning websites (free or paid) and 40% find resources through social media platforms. Only 17% accessed resources provided by OME or EQAO. While some participants acknowledged they were aware of and accessed ministry documents related to the OSSLT, the extent to which they used these and other resources is unclear and requires further research.

Yet, given the emphasis on the importance of the OSSLT, the small percentage of teachers who refer to OME and EQAO materials is intriguing. Out of curiosity, we conducted a simple search for available OME and EQAO documents that were freely available online. It appears that only a small number of OME and EQAO documents exist that support test preparation. We found this surprising, and of the documents that were created for educators, most from the OME resources were quite dated (see Table 4).

Table 4

Government Resources Related to the OSSLT

Agency	Title	Year	Audience
OME	Preparing Students for the OSSLT: Best Practices from Ontario School Boards	2003	Educators
OME	The Ontario Secondary School Literacy Course, Grade 12	2003	General public

Agency	Title	Year	Audience
OME	The Ontario Secondary School Literacy Course, Grade 12	2003	General public
OME	The Ontario Secondary School Literacy Course, Grade 12	2003	General public
EQAO	Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test Framework	2006	General public
OME	The Ontario Curriculum, Grades 9 and 10	2007	Educators
OME	Ontario Schools Policy and Program Requirements	2012	Educators
EQAO	Guidelines for Classroom Displays	2017	Educators
EQAO	Highlights of the Provincial Results	2017	General public
EQAO	Highlights of the Provincial Results	2018	General public
EQAO	Highlights of the Provincial Results	2019	General public

Of the other documents available to educators, the majority appear to be sample tests from previous years that can be found online on various schoolboard websites. However, sample questions and answer booklets are not sufficient curricular resources for teachers to use to prepare students (Fox & Cheng, 2007). While scholars such as Fox and Cheng (2007) observe the importance of students becoming familiar with testing materials, they are concerned that students might only focus on developing "testing strategies" to pass, rather than on developing literacy skills. More on this is discussed later, but for now, we note the lack of resources available for English teachers to use in their classrooms to guide and support students' literacy development and lead to success on high-stakes exams, such as the OSSLT. As such, further research is needed to consider sharing evidence-based strategies that teachers have successfully implemented to support students in the applied stream on the OSSLT. Such research could also better inform approaches to curriculum development, literacy instruction, creation of high-stakes standardized testing and policy.

The Role of the Teacher as Resource

While instructional strategies in relation to curricular expectations and resources are important, the literature also shows the significant impact a caring and compassionate teacher can have in preparing students for standardized tests (Merchant et al., 2020). Teacher care is strongly associated with motivating students when it takes the form of ongoing formative assessments and lesson implementations that are more practical and relevant for students (Merchant et al., 2020). Van de Wal and Ryan (2014) also highlight the role of caring teachers in student success, noting they are "the most effective tool for helping adolescent learners increase their engagement and achievement with respect to literacy" (p. 18). This was echoed in Kearns' (2011, 2016) studies, where participants often reflected on the role of their teachers in supporting their learning. Caring teachers are those who provide tasks that permit student choice and optimize students' talents, interests and skills (Van de Wal & Ryan, 2014). Thus, the notion of a student-centred curriculum is central, not just with

instructional strategies, but also with how students may be able to understand and apply key concepts on exams such as the OSSLT. In the context of the applied English classroom, the importance of teachers who maximize student engagement is arguably even more significant to consider.

Considering the Exam Itself

It is worth taking a necessary sidestep to consider the exam itself in relation to applied English classroom instruction. This relationship was a common theme and topic that surfaced in our analysis of the literature. There are potential external factors to consider that may impact students' success on the exam; one of these, as noted briefly earlier, may include familiarity with the test material.

Exam-taking requires some level of awareness and knowledge of the testing structure; this familiarity can be helpful for students and may increase their chances of success. Acquiring exam familiarity can be both implicit and explicit in nature. Explicit exam familiarity may take the form of specific instructions from the teacher or by reviewing previous exams to identify traditional or typical patterns. For example, students may note the structure of open-ended questions, such as the spaces or blank lines below an open-prompt question. While first-language test-takers report using the number of lines provided as a strategy to plan their answer, second-language test-takers, who are often enrolled in applied classes, do not necessarily know how to use this information strategically (Fox & Cheng, 2007). While Fox and Cheng's (2007) research, along with others, is focused on second language learning students, the findings from these studies speak to the different behaviours that the test and the English classroom can elicit, which also have important implications for the applied classroom. We can assume from their research that some students have an advantage over others, simply because they are aware and familiar with the testing material. With this in mind, one might conclude that students' final literacy scores may not necessarily represent their literacy skills (Fox & Cheng, 2007). Further, as Kearns (2011) observes:

> the OSSLT creates further conditions that make and continue to mark marginalized youth as different . . . [who] do not possess the historically dominant currency of those positions of power, namely, the white middle class, English as first language, and/or male norms. (p. 125)

From a critical perspective, those with privilege are students who may be described as knowing how to navigate the genre of schooling. Thus, knowledge and awareness of exam materials allow students of the dominant culture to do better on high-stakes exams, such as the OSSLT, than students who do not belong to the dominant culture. For example, students from the dominant culture understand how to navigate the genre of the test more efficiently because of their familiarity with the cultural norms implicit in the test.

Fox and Cheng (2007) contextualize what is valued or defined as literacy on the test and what is valued as literacy in the classroom as an issue that Messick (1989, 1994) refers to as consequential validity. Wall (1997) suggests that because of the washback effects or the influence of the test-taking experience itself on individuals or other factors that can affect test performance, it is necessary to scrutinize whether the OSSLT is truly measuring what it intends to measure—literacy (Fox & Cheng, 2007).

While some educators implement a "teach to the test" method to prepare students for the OSSLT, Van de Wal and Ryan (2014) suggest that students who are struggling with exam preparation require interventions "beyond simple tutorials that teach to the test" (p. 17). This said, there may be sound reasons for educators to teach to the test. They include wanting to save students from the embarrassment of failure or to compensate for students' poor work habits (Merchant et al., 2020). Another reason, as noted earlier, could be to simply familiarize some students with the testing structures.

Curriculum Expectations of "Literacy" and Exam Expectations

Part of the disconnect between approaches to teaching literacy and approaches to testing literacy may lie with the inconsistent definitions and understanding of the term "literacy" in general. While literacy was once defined as the ability to read and write, this definition is now considered too one-dimensional (Van de Wal & Ryan, 2014). As Chun (2009) articulates, "because meaning-making has become increasingly multi-modal, our definition of literacy needs to encompass not only the textual, but also the visual, the spatial and the aural" (p. 145). The New London Group (1996) similarly notes that the notion of "literacy" is much more complex and challenging to define as we engage with multiple modes of meaning-making and engage in multiple literacy practices, or "multiliteracies." However, even in their most recent OSSLT framework document, EQAO (2022) continues to approach "literacy" as reading and writing. This disconnect between subject matter experts and the EQAO is further exacerbated by well-informed English teachers who engage students in multiple modes and multiliteracy practices. Kearns (2011) highlights one participant's observations, saying, "she stated that she had strong oral skills and could demonstrate her knowledge in that way in the classroom, but admitted having to work harder in written contexts" (p. 120). While many English teachers may implement different literacy practices in their classrooms, from texts (e.g., graphic novels, film, etc.) to topics and issues (e.g., environmental, social justice) and different modes of expressing one's understanding (e.g., oral presentations, visual representations), the authors of this paper argue that there appears to be a mismatch between curricular expectations/what is occurring in the classroom and what is being tested on the OSSLT. This makes it hard to define, let alone establish, a set of "best practices" in preparing students for the OSSLT. This is especially challenging for educators if they are expected to or prefer to include multimodal literacy practices in their classrooms, but the OSSLT only tests traditional reading and writing skills.

Different definitions and understandings of literacy were also evident in our survey study. One of the questions asked participants whether they believed the OSSLT to be an accurate measure of literacy skills. Almost all participants indicated that they agreed this statement was true. However, when asked about different approaches to literacy development in their classes, it was evident that they engaged in and even relied more on multiple literacy practices (see Figures 1 and 2).

Figure 1

Results of Survey Question 1:

According to EQAO, the OSSLT is intended to measure whether Grade 10 students are meeting the minimum standard of literacy across curricular subjects. Do you believe that the OSSLT is a valid measure of this? (N=141)

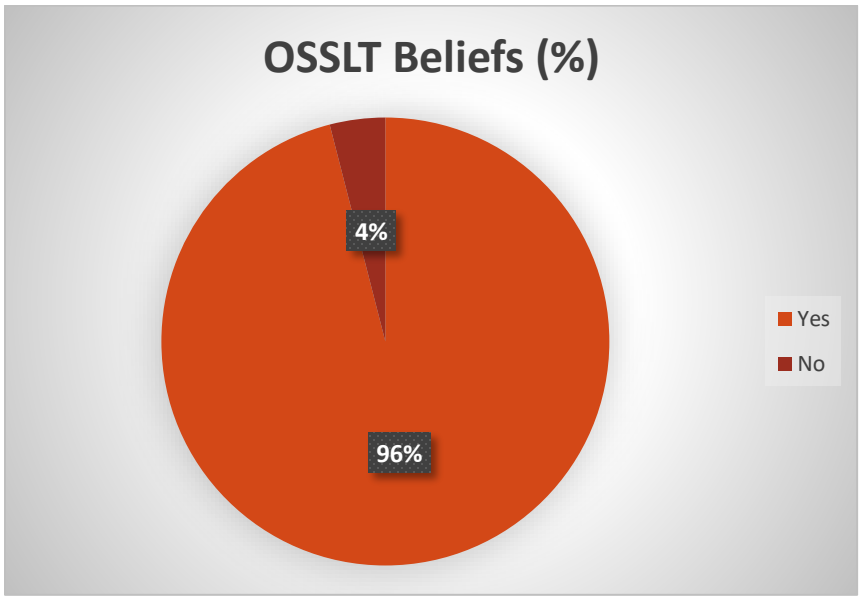
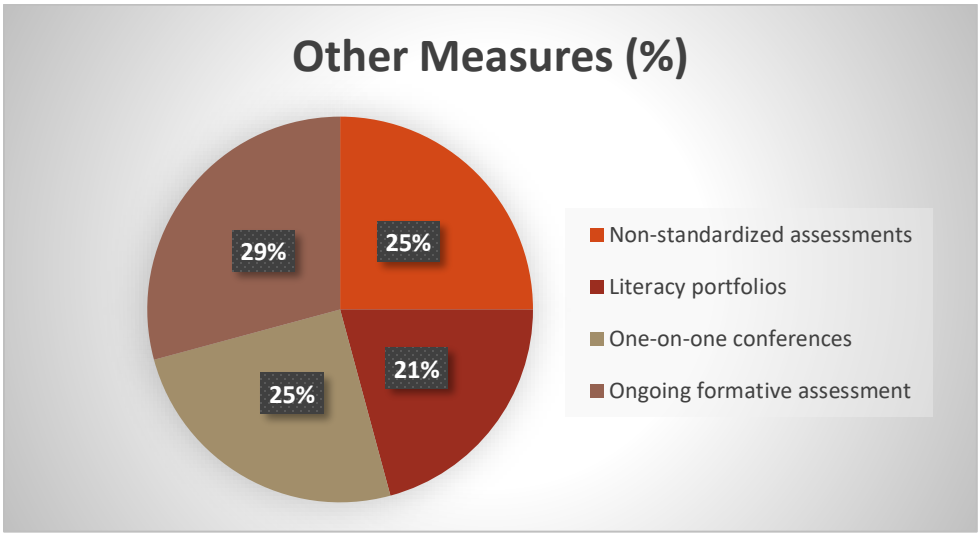


Figure 2

Results of survey question 2:

What, if anything, do you believe would be a more valid measure of students' literacy skills than the OSSLT? (N=141)



English educators are encouraged to include multimodal instructional strategies and assignments in their classrooms as many education stakeholders have highlighted the importance of

multiliteracies. These skills serve to support the development of students' "21st Century Skills" that, according to The Council of Ontario Directors of Education (2015), include the development of the following: critical thinking and problem-solving; innovation, creativity, and entrepreneurship; learning to learn/self-aware and self-directed learning; collaboration; communication; and global citizenship. While the authors of this paper note the significance of traditional modes of literacy, we also draw attention to the mismatch between English curricular documents that outline the importance of multiliteracies and the OSSLT. We openly ask and encourage discussion around the following questions: Should the OSSLT not also align with these curricular objectives? Is it necessary to reconsider how the OSSLT defines and measures literacy to ensure it is in line with the literacy practices that occur in current classrooms?

Discussion: Considering Curriculum and Assessment

Findings from our research help to re-emphasize the need for an overarching idea of "curriculum" and how its many elements—expectations, assessment, pedagogical instructions—must be integrated and aligned. Without this alignment, there will be potentially negative impacts on our students. We suggest that there is a need to re-imagine definitions, approaches and expectations of "literacy" to better guide our students, especially in applied English classrooms.

The notion of "curriculum" is vast and complicated, and definitions vary and are ever shifting. As Connelly and Clandinin (1988) note, educators all have a preference, a bias, as to what curriculum can or should be. At the same time, there are also very prescribed views of what curriculum is. The following list identifies some of these prescribed definitions as shared by Connelly and Clandinin (1988, p. 5):

1. A sequence of potential experiences set up in the school (Smith et al., 1957).
2. All the experiences a learner has under the guidance of the school (Foshay, 1969).
3. A general overall plan of the content or specific materials of instruction that the school should offer the student by way of qualifying him for graduation or certification or for entrance into a professional or vocational field (Good, 1959).
4. The planned and guided learning experiences and intended learning outcomes, formulated through the systematic reconstruction of knowledge and experience under the auspices of the school for the learner's continuous and willful growth in person-social competence (Tanner & Tanner, 1975).
5. Curriculum must consist essentially of disciplined study in five areas: (i) command of the mother tongue and the systematic study of grammar, literature and writing; (ii) mathematics; (iii) sciences; (iv) history; (v) foreign language (Bestor, 1955).

While these definitions vary, there are some common elements: the requirement and/or experiences and/or approaches to learning, understanding and applying knowledge or a set of skills to become a valuable member of society. Analyzing the different ideologies of curriculum is beyond the scope of this article, but the missing component in all these definitions, and most others, is the

need for a strong correspondence between curriculum and assessment. If educators engage students in the learning process to obtain specific learning goals, assessment of learners' progress towards those learning goals becomes necessary, whether that be via student reflection or goal setting (assessment as learning), observations, feedback and strategic questioning from the teacher (assessment for learning), or unit-long projects or final exams (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010). Thus, assessment practice is deeply rooted in curriculum, which is in turn rooted in contemporary theories of learning (Shepard, 2000). The interconnectedness of assessment and curriculum becomes especially clear when the purpose of assessment is to drive students' learning forward. So, questions of where students are, where they are going and how they will get there can only be answered with an understanding of the connection between curriculum and assessment. Moreover, as teachers and students engage with these questions, they shape how the curriculum is actualized in the classroom. They also construct a taken-as-shared understanding of the curriculum, either explicitly or implicitly, which can in turn further develop students' literacy skills and success on the OSSLT. Curriculum shapes assessment and assessment shapes enacted curriculum. Thus, assessments of learning through standardized tests can only inform a trustworthy interpretation of what students have learned when they align with the enacted curriculum. Based on the data, the authors wonder: Why is there such a gap between what is expected in the classroom and what is assessed on the OSSLT?

As noted previously, results from the 2019 OSSLT showed that 59% of applied level learners did not pass the OSSLT. This alone has serious implications. Not only are students who are unsuccessful on the OSSLT at risk of not graduating, but test failure can also have significant consequences for students' self-esteem and thus affect students' overall academic success (Kearns, 2011, 2016). These effects can also be far-reaching, causing students who are unsuccessful on the OSSLT to question their future educational and career choices. One reason for this could possibly be because they themselves, their teachers and/or councillors, unfairly use the test as a gauge of academic ability (Luce-Kapler & Klinger, 2005). While achievement on the OSSLT is a well-researched area, to date, the focus has largely been on the experience of specific groups of students, such as English Language Learners. There has been minimal research focused on the success rates of students in applied English classrooms in general, which comprises a more diverse range and background of students. Related to the points made above, there is still a deficit discourse used to describe most students in applied English classrooms in current literature that continues to further stigmatize students in applied English classrooms.

As educators, the authors of this paper wondered about the mismatch between what is being tested and what the curricular expectations and classroom practices are when developing students' literacy skills, especially those in applied English classrooms. Given this mismatch, we wondered how educators can identify and implement best practices. Clearly, some teachers and schools are doing this regardless of the mismatch, as demonstrated by the 41% percent of students in the applied stream who passed the OSSLT in 2019. Further research is needed to identify the strategies and supports offered in some school boards, schools and/or classrooms where English students in the applied stream are successfully passing the OSSLT on their first attempt.

Conclusion

Like Kearns' (2011) work, our research suggests that it is perhaps even more important and necessary to broaden the dialogue about the impact of the OSSLT and look at why it may not be in the best interest of all students. To do so, Kearns suggested differentiating classroom activities and assessments for different levels and modes of literacy, moving to multiple literacy portfolios that allow students to showcase their oral, visual and written communication skills by developing local literacy curricula that meet the specific needs of diverse groups of learners and by imagining alternatives to standardized tests like the OSSLT. We offer another suggestion, knowing very well that it may not be entertained as a viable one in the foreseeable future: to remove the high-stakes nature of the OSSLT, specifically, the graduation requirement.

Putting aside for the moment the disconnect between what is being taught in the applied classroom and what is being tested with regard to students' literacy skills, the Ontario Ministry of Education and the EQAO, both heavily emphasize the importance of the OSSLT, but do not provide the necessary guided supports and resources that teachers need to support all students. This is further compounded by the discrepancies between the Ministry's understanding of literacy found in their curricular documents, classroom practices and standardized assessments.

Research demonstrates that teachers do not need to (nor should they) rely on "teaching to the test;" rather, they might approach literacy and test-taking preparation differently (Barber & Klauda, 2020). They might, as Barber and Klauda (2020) suggest, find opportunities to connect to students on topics of interest, afford them opportunities to learn concepts and skills in a manner that is meaningful and lasting and otherwise engage in a student-centred-curriculum approach. Inviting students to engage in reading their own choice of text can increase student motivation and confidence, but also overall reading comprehension skills (Barber & Klauda, 2020). This approach to increasing reading comprehension skills might give students a better opportunity to succeed on "traditional" assessment forms, such as the OSSLT. While this approach makes sense, the authors of this paper argue that this can only occur if there is an alignment between the expectations of the curriculum and the exam.

Our research comes at a pivotal time for learners in the applied stream, because often the applied stream has a higher number of marginalized and racialized students who are more negatively affected by continuous shifts of learning environments such as those brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic in recent years (Yang & Kennedy, 2020). The move to de-stream all core subject classes in Ontario in 2022 is yet another shift in the learning environment that is likely to take a toll on students. Without adequate supports in place, we worry that this change may have an even greater impact on the success of students in applied level classes.

Yet, there is hope. While the research does show a high number of learners in applied English classes who fail, the near-equal number of students who pass is also important to consider. Rather than focusing on where there is failure, it is important to notice the gaps, focus on what has been done well and share evidence-based research and teacher success stories for the benefit of all our students.

References

Barber, A. T., & Klauda, S. L. (2020). How reading motivation and engagement enable reading achievement: Policy implications. *Policy Insights from the Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, *7*(1), 27-34. https://doi.org/10.1177/2372732219893385

Bestor, A. E. (1955). *The restoration of learning: A program for redeeming the unfilled promise of American education.* Knopf.

Brackenreed, D. (2004). Teacher's perceptions of the effects of testing accommodations. *Exceptionality Education Canada*, *14*(1), 5-22.

Cheng, L., Fox, J., & Zheng, Y. (2007). Student accounts of the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test: A case for validation. *Canadian Modern Language Review, 64*(1), 69-98. https://doi.org/10.3138/cmlr.64.1.069

Cheng, L., Klinger, D. A., & Zheng, Y. (2009). Examining students' after-school literacy activities and their literacy performance on the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test. *Canadian Journal of Education, 32*(1), 118-148.

Chun, C. W. (2009). Critical literacies and graphic novels for English-language learners: Teaching Maus. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, *53*(2), 144-153. https://doi.org/10.1598/JAAL.53.2.5

Connelly, F. M., & Clandinin, D. J. (1988). *Teachers as curriculum planners: Narratives of experience*. Teachers College Press.

Creswell, J. W. (2007). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches.* SAGE Publications.

Creswell, J. W. (2014*). Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches.* SAGE Publications.

Denomme, F., & Childs, R. (2008). Does Ontario have an achievement gap? The challenge of comparing the performance of students in French-and English-language schools on national and international assessments. *Canadian Journal of Educational Administration and Policy, 71,* 1-24.

Doe, C., Cheng, L., Fox, J., Klinger, D., & Zheng, Y. (2011). What has experience got to do with it? An exploration of L1 and L2 Test takers' perceptions of test performance and alignment to classroom literacy activities. *Canadian Journal of Education, 34*(3), 68-85.

Education Quality and Accountability Office. (2013). *EQAO: Ontario's provincial assessment program*. Retrieved from: https://www.eqao.com/wp-content/uploads/EQAO-history-influence.pdf

Education Quality and Accountability Office. (2019). *Ontario student achievement 2018-2019.* Retrieved from: https://www.eqao.com/provincial-report-secondary-2019-pdf/

Education Quality and Accountability Office. (2020). *Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test.* https://www.eqao.com/the-assessments/osslt/

Education Quality and Accountability Office. (2021). *Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test.* https://www.eqao.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/framework-osslt.pdf

Education Quality and Accountability Office. (2022). *Framework, Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test*. https://www.eqao.com/framework-osslt/

Foshay, A. W. (1969). Curriculum. In R. I. Ebel (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of educational research: A project of the American Educational Research Association* (4th ed., pp. 5-119). Macmillan.

Fox, J., & Cheng, L. (2007). Did we take the same test? Differing accounts of the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test by first and second language test-takers. *Assessment in Education, 14*(1), 9-26. https://doi.org/10.1080/09695940701272773

Good, C. V. (Ed.). (1959). *Dictionary of education* (2nd ed.). McGraw-Hill.

Hattie, J., & Timperley, H. (2007). The power of feedback. *Review of Educational Research*, *77*(1), 81-112. https://doi.org/10.3102/003465430298487

Kearns, L. L. (2011). High-stakes standardized testing and marginalized youth: An examination of the impact on those who fail. *Canadian Journal of Education, 34*(2), 112-130.

Kearns, L. L. (2016). The construction of 'illiterate' and 'literate' youth: The effects of high-stakes standardized literacy testing. *Race, Ethnicity and Education, 19(1),* 121-140. https://doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2013.843520

Klinger, D. A., & Luce-Kapler, R. (2008). Walking in their shoes: Students' perceptions of large-scale high-stakes testing. *Canadian Journal of Program Evaluation*, *22*(3), 29-52. https://doi.org/10.3138/cjpe.0022.004

Klinger, D. A., Rogers, W. T., Anderson, J. O., Poth, C., & Calman, R. (2006). Contextual and school factors associated with achievement on a high-stakes examination. *Canadian Journal of Education*, *29*(3), 771-797. https://doi.org/10.2307/20054195

Luce-Kapler, R., & Klinger, D. (2005). Uneasy writing: The defining moments of high-stakes literacy testing. *Assessing Writing*, *10*(3), 157-173. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.asw.2005.08.002

Marshall, B., & Gibbons, S. (2018). Assessing English: A Comparison between Canada and England's Assessment Procedures. *Education Sciences, 8*(4), 211. https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci8040211

Merchant, S., Rich, J., Klinger, D., & Luce-Kapler, R. (2020). The enactment of applied English. *Canadian Journal of Education*, *43*(3), 803-828.

Messick, S. (1989). Validity. In R.L. Linn (Ed.) *Educational measurement* (3rd ed., pp. 13-103). Macmillan.

Messick, S. (1996) Validity and washback in language testing. *Language Testing, 13*, 243-256. https://doi.org/10.1177/026553229601300302

New London Group (1996). A pedagogy of multiliteracies: Designing social futures. *Harvard Educational Review*, *66*(1), 60-92. https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.66.1.17370n67v22j160u

Ontario Ministry of Education. (2003). *Preparing students for the OSSLT: Best practices from Ontario school boards.* http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/document/brochure/osslte.pdf

Ontario Ministry of Education. (2003). *Ontario Secondary School Literacy Course.* http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/curriculum/secondary/english12curr.pdf

Ontario Ministry of Education. (2007). *The Ontario curriculum, Grades 9 and 10, English.* http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/curriculum/secondary/english910currb.pdf

Ontario Ministry of Education. (2010). *Growing success: Assessment, evaluation, and reporting in Ontario schools*. https://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/policyfunding/growsuccess.pdf

Quigley, B. (2011). Remixing the Ontario secondary school literacy test (OSSLT). *Journal of Global Citizenship & Equity Education*, *1*(1), 164-182.

Shepard, L. A. (2000). The role of assessment in a learning culture. *Educational Researcher, 29*(7), 4-14. https://doi.org/10.2307/1176145

Slomp, D. H. (2005). Teaching and assessing language skills: Defining the knowledge that matters. *English Teaching: Practice and Critique, 4*(3), 141-155.

Smith, L., Kleine, P., Prunty, J., & Dwiyer, D. (1986). *Fundamentals of curriculum development*. Hartcourt, Brace and World.

Steele, C. (1997). A threat in the air: How stereotypes shape intellectual identity and performance. *American Psychologist*, *52*(6), 613-629. https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.52.6.613

Tanner, D., & Tanner, L. N. (1975). *Curriculum development: Theory into practice*. Macmillan.

Van De Wal, L., & Ryan, T. G. (2014). Student perceptions of literacy after the Ontario secondary literacy course: A qualitative inquiry. *Brock Education: A Journal of Educational Research and Practice, 23*(2), 3-23. https://doi.org/10.26522/brocked.v23i2.325

Wall, D. (1997) Impact and washback in language testing. In C. Clapham & D. Corson (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of language and education, Vol. 7, Language testing and assessment*. Kluwer Academic Publishers (pp. 291-302).

White, B. (2007). Are girls better readers than boys? Which boys? Which girls? *Canadian Journal of Education, 30(2),* 554-581. https://doi.org/10.2307/20466650

Yang, J., & Kennedy, B. (2020, September 12). As wealthy parents turn to learning pods and private schools, low-income families say they're being forced to choose between their health and their kids' education. *Toronto Star*. Retrieved from: https://www.thestar.com/news/gta/2020/09/12/as-some-parents-turn-to-learning-pods-or-private-schools-low-income-families-face-a-stark-choice-about-their-kids-education.html

Zheng, Y., Klinger, D. A., Cheng, L., Fox, J., & Doe, C. (2011). Test-takers' background, literacy activities, and views of the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test. *Alberta Journal of Educational Research, 57*(2), 115-136.