

Summary of Proposed Research

Over the past twenty years, immigration policies have resulted in an increasing proportion of immigrants entering educational systems throughout Canada with little or no experience or training in English. These English as a Second Language (ESL) and English Literacy Development (ELD) students are estimated to form 20-50% of the general student population in urban K-12 systems across Canada (Roessingh, 1999). Ontario secondary schools have seen the greatest increase of ESL/ELD students over the past twenty years. These second language (L2) students are provided with extra support for only a short period to help them quickly achieve fundamental English literacy skills. However, such support requires additional school expenditures that may not be readily available when funding for education is being restricted. The trend has been that even though the number of ESL/ELD students in Ontario increased by 23% in one year alone (2001-2002), the number of ESL/ELD teachers and support programs in Ontario schools has declined by 30% over the past five years (Blackett, 2002). At the same time, large-scale achievement testing has increasingly been used to measure student competency and ensure system accountability (Firestone, Mayrowetz, & Fairman, 1998; Ryan, 2002). In Ontario, the most recent example of such a testing is the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test (OSSLT) administered by the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO). The confluence of both the increased number of L2 students and the expanding testing framework has created a new and largely unanticipated educational problem – alarmingly high failure rates for these students (Watt & Roessingh, 2001). Further, the OSSLT is constructed and normed for first language (L1) English speakers. Research suggests that such tests may have lower reliability and validity for L2 students and should be interpreted differently (Abedi, Leon, & Mirocha, 2003). Clearly, these tests add extra challenges to the academic success of these L2 students. They also highlight problematic levels of underachievement as evidenced by ESL/ELD students' low success and high deferral rates on the OSSLT.

The objectives of the proposed study are, therefore, to: 1) examine ESL/ELD students' OSSLT performance; 2) investigate the potential influence of OSSLT on the learning of this group of students; and 3) explore the factors that contribute to or impede ESL/ELD students' OSSLT performance and their academic success in Ontario secondary schools. The study will be undertaken over two phases. The first phase will investigate the characteristics of the OSSLT and test-takers' OSSLT performance by analyzing the results of the 2004 OSSLT and EQAO-Student Questionnaire (EQAO-SQ) by comparing ESL/ELD with non-ESL/ELD students (n=8000). Only by examining both groups can the nature of OSSLT challenges specific to ESL/ELD students be fully understood (McLachlan, 1992). The second phase will investigate the impact of OSSLT on ESL/ELD student academic learning in schools through three interrelated research strategies of tracking, focus groups and a questionnaire survey over a three-year period. This phase will be conducted in three school boards in Ottawa, Kingston and Toronto, where there are increasing numbers of ESL/ELD students, and involve more than 600 ESL/ELD and non ESL/ELD students. Taken together, the results from Phases One and Two will provide an in-depth comprehensive view of the impact of OSSLT on ESL/ELD students. The findings will provide information on features of their academic learning and be of potential benefit to them by identifying those ESL/ELD students most at risk of failure. The findings will be provided to 1) EQAO for purposes of test validation and (if relevant) strategic test accommodation for ESL/EDL students, and 2) to other relevant school boards, policy and government agencies that are instrumental in the education of this growing student population.