The Experiences and Perceptions of Chinese English Language Learners Taking the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test: Is a Picture Worth 1000 Words?

by

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Abstract

The public education system in Ontario, like many other education systems worldwide, is currently undergoing drastic changes effected by globalization. The globalization of education, which can be understood as “the worldwide discussions, processes, and institutions affecting local education practices and policies” (Spring, 2009, p. 1), has led to Ontario’s curriculum being used in over 20 schools located outside the province (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2011). Because these schools grant the Ontario Secondary School Diploma (OSSD), students must satisfy the same graduation requirements as those students who attend secondary school located in Ontario. A requirement for graduation includes the successful completion of the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test (OSSLT), a large-scale assessment intended to measure literacy. English Language Learners (ELLs) have more difficulty passing the OSSLT than their peers who speak English as their first language (Doe, Cheng, Klinger, & Zheng, 2011; Fox & Cheng, 2007). This issue is of particular concern to educators and students at these schools. Because the majority of these schools are located in China, my study focuses on ELLs in one school in China which uses the Ontario curriculum. The purpose of my study is twofold: 1) to understand how Chinese English Language Learners perceive the news report on the OSSLT, and 2) to understand how issues of culturally embedded knowledge affect their ability to take the test (the OSSLT) successfully.

I selected a qualitative research approach because the intent of this study was to understand the perspectives of Chinese ELLs. I conducted three focus groups with one
class of ELLS in one secondary school in China. I also used observations and analysis of written artifacts to triangulate the collected data.

The findings of this study revealed some challenges and perspectives on the OSSLT specific to Chinese ELLs. I conclude that the issue of cultural literacy is a key factor preventing Chinese ELLs from demonstrating their true level of literacy on the OSSLT.
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Chapter 1

Introduction

The globalization of education has had an incredible influence over the lives of many students throughout the world. The globalization of education, which can be understood as “the worldwide discussions, processes, and institutions affecting local education practices and policies” (Spring, 2009, p. 1), was visible to me firsthand while I was working as a teacher at an Ontario curriculum high school in China. I observed evidence of multiple examples of the globalization of education on the lives and opportunities of my Chinese students. A system of education with standards, curriculum, and practices intended for Ontario-residing students was now being used beyond the borders of the province and Canada.

The inspiration for this research began while I was overseeing a grade 10 cohort of students writing the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test (OSSLT) at the school I was teaching at in China. These students, like many others hoping to graduate with an Ontario Secondary School Diploma (OSSD) in Ontario, Canada, were writing a large-scale assessment designed to test their literacy in English. On the same day, students in secondary schools throughout Ontario sat this same assessment, completing a variety of assessment activities. All students writing this test do so under similar conditions; the timeframe, testing format, testing materials, verbal test instructions, and the manner in which teachers overseeing the test are permitted to answer students’ questions are uniform, specified by rules prepared by Ontario’s Education Quality and Accountability
Office (EQAO) (2012). Regardless of the detailed instructions provided to Ontario teachers (and to teachers such as myself in schools abroad with Ontario curriculum), I knew the students who I was overseeing in China were a unique cohort. None of these students spoke English as their first language, not a single student in the room was Canadian, and very few had even visited Ontario or Canada. Yet these students were all hoping to graduate with an OSSD. All of these students were Chinese English Language Learners (ELLs) hoping to attend post-secondary school in a country where the first language was English.

As of January 2012, 20 schools (some with multiple campuses) outside of Ontario were approved by the Ontario Ministry of Education to offer the OSSD (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2012). With this relatively new expansion of Ontario’s educational influence, how this relatively un-researched group of students will fare under a curriculum designed by a government that they are separated from by distance—both literally and figuratively—remains unknown. Research has demonstrated that ELLs must contend with a greater number of challenges when writing large-scale assessments than their peers who speak English as a first language (Abedi, 2005; Bailey & Butler, 2004). With regard to the OSSLT specifically, ELLs writing the test have a pass rate on the test well below that of their native English speaking peers, with only 45% of ELLs passing the test (EQAO, 2011).

Test developers commonly use criteria to assess students that are “usually modeled on first language development and performance of the language majority
population in society” (Leung & Lewkowicz, 2008, p. 304). The OSSLT has been shown to measure far more than a test subject’s literacy level: it also measures a student’s knowledge of cultural information and norms (Fox & Cheng, 2007). Currently, limited research exists “involving ELL test takers who are representative of the range of different subgroups that contribute to the texture of this population” (Fairbairn & Fox, 2009, p. 14). In addition to students attending an Ontario-curriculum school outside of the province, ELLs living in Ontario may also be affected by this cultural aspect of the OSSLT.

As the Ontario education system becomes increasingly affected by globalization, identifying the benefits and challenges that a more diverse student population brings is imperative to the success of future generations of educators and of their students. Throughout the country and within the province of Ontario, the largest immigrant population is from China (Statistics Canada, 2006). Of the international schools using Ontario’s curriculum, half of the international schools using Ontario’s curriculum are situated in mainland China or Hong Kong (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2011). Fu (2003) demonstrated that Chinese English Language Learners in particular are an unique set of language learners with a specific set of challenges and learning patterns. Thus, the goal of this study is to examine a cohort of students who represent a large, yet under-researched part of the Ontario curriculum’s student population—Chinese ELLs studying the Ontario curriculum overseas—while simultaneously looking at a broader, less geographically-specific topic that is also underrepresented in research: test-taker
perspectives of large-scale assessments (Cohen, 2007). This study should help provide some sorely needed “research involving ELL test takers, who are representative of the range of different subgroups” (Fairbairn & Fox, 2009, p. 14) existing within the ELL population.

**Purpose**

The purpose of this study is to explore the challenges experienced by Chinese ELLs taking the OSSLT in the context of a Chinese school using the Ontario curriculum. The guiding research questions are as follows:

1. How do Chinese ELLs taking the OSSLT perceive the tasks required on the OSSLT?
2. How do issues of culturally embedded knowledge affect their ability to take the test successfully?

**Rationale**

A number of factors combine to make this proposed study a worthwhile endeavour. The number of ELLs who are being educated through Ontario’s curriculum is quickly increasing, as is the use of large-scale assessment (Levin, 1998; Statistics Canada, 2006). The largest ELL group being educated following the Ontario curriculum comes from China. International education is also expanding rapidly, once again with the largest number of Ontario curriculum international schools situated in China (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2012). Existing research demonstrates that ELL “students find it very difficult to succeed in large-scale English literacy examinations” (Zheng, Cheng, & Klinger, 2007, p. 189). With the aforementioned increases in ELL students, overseas
schools using Ontario’s curriculum, and use of large-scale assessment, a deeper understanding of this phenomenon is crucial in order to better support ELL students. The intent of this study is to investigate the ELLs and the difficulties they face with large-scale assessment, as well as addressing the research gaps that exist about ELLs and large-scale assessment. Furthermore, this study will give more than one voice to ELLs; the diversity of perspectives and perceptions of these students writing the OSSLT are explored in an effort to address “the considerable variability within the ELL population as a whole” by focusing solely on Chinese ELLs being educated through an Ontario curriculum-based international school (Fairbairn & Fox, 2009, p. 19). The study also addresses a gap in research that involves the direct perspectives of ELL test-takers. Cohen (2007) earlier commented on the need within the educational research community to examine a test from the test-takers’ perspective. Furthermore, the addition of overseas Ontario curriculum schools is a relatively recent phenomenon that has not been explored by many researchers. This study will provide much needed data concerning the experiences and perspectives of a relatively new cohort of students, i.e., those students residing overseas who are being educated with the Ontario curriculum.

**Important Terms and Definitions**

Before engaging with the findings of my research, it is important to highlight and explain certain terms that are used often throughout this study. Particularly since these terms can be described differently depending on whose definition is being used, it is
imperative that the specified terms are used with a consistent definition to interpret my study.

**English language learners (ELLS).** For the purposes of this study, an ELL is defined as being a student whose first language is not English, or is a kind of English that differs considerably from the English used in Ontario’s classrooms (English Language Learners: ESL and ELD Programs and Services, 2007). These are students “who may require focused educational supports to assist them in attaining proficiency in English” (English Language Learners: ESL and ELD Programs and Services, 2007, p. 8). Although my research involved Chinese students still living in China, I use this definition because they are being educated through Ontario’s curriculum, courses, and by Ontario trained and certified teachers.

**Globalization of education.** As mentioned earlier in this chapter, the globalization of education is being defined as “the worldwide discussions, processes, and institutions affecting local education practices and policies” (Spring, 2009, p. 1). I selected this definition because of its broad and inclusive nature. The globalization of education, succinctly describes the many facets of a phenomenon as complex as the globalization of education: policy, large-scale assessment, classroom practice, as well as the culture of local school environments.

**Cultural literacy.** Cultural literacy is contentious term within the research community. Through a simple search of the literature, varying perspectives of cultural literacy quickly emerge. For the purposes of this study, I define cultural literacy as the
knowledge and understanding of a specific culture’s idioms, colloquialisms, allusions, and content that is often non-academic in nature (Hirsch, 1987). I selected this particular definition for several reasons: Hirsch’s work is seminal in the field of education; the definition notes the non-academic nature of cultural literacy and also highlights that cultural literacy is, of course, culture-specific.

**Large-scale assessment.** When testing is used as “a form of accountability, a mechanism for gatekeeping, and a tool for instructional diagnosis (Nagy, 2000), it can be understood as a large-scale assessment. For the purposes of this study, large-scale assessment is defined in the aforementioned manner, with the OSSLT included in this category.

**Structural Overview**

My thesis consists of six chapters. This first introductory chapter presents an initial foundation for understanding this study: a rationale, purpose, and a definition of important terminology comprise this chapter. I now delineate the structure of the remaining chapters.

In chapter two, I review the relevant literature in five categories: large-scale assessment, ELLs, large-scale assessment and ELLs, the globalization of education, and cultural literacy. Within each of these review categories, specific sub-themes from with each broad category are presented in order to connect directly with my study. I address only specific areas of research due to the broad scope of the five categories of research.
The third chapter of my thesis discusses the methodology that served as the mechanism to answer my initial research questions. The methodology chapter includes a description of the instruments used in my study, the research site, the participants, as well as the research questions used in this study. This chapter also details the data collection and analysis, outlining the collection, coding, and analysis procedures. I outline the reasons, both practical and academic, that influenced the choices I made for this phase of my study.

In chapter four, I share the findings of my study. The chapter is divided by each phase of the data collection process; observations, the scoring of the completed news report test question, and the focus group discussions each have their own section.

The fifth chapter is focused on a discussion of the findings presented in chapter four. Deeper connections to the supporting literature are made.

The final chapter, chapter six, is used to summarize the important findings of my study. The limitations of my study are noted. I also outline the potential implications for future research, changes to policy, and classroom practice. I conclude my thesis by synthesizing the findings into observations and data that directly answer my initial research questions.
Chapter 2

Literature Review

In this study, Chinese ELLs attending an Ontario curriculum school in China are asked about their perspectives of a provincial large-scale assessment. To guide this study, I review research studies in four main areas: large-scale assessment, English language learners, globalization in education, and cultural literacy. This literature review combines these four areas to provide an appropriate context and foundation for this study. Within each of the four major topics of reviewed research, specific subtopics have been used to explore certain areas in greater detail. Rather than focus on one seminal research journal to guide the literature review topics, each topic and subtopic use multiple sources to provide a holistic, well-rounded understanding of the academic discourse surrounding these areas of research within the academic field of education. As each of the topics in this literature review can be defined in a variety of ways, specific and working topic definitions are provided to best support the context of this study, followed by the review in each of the four areas.

The topic of large-scale assessment is a vast and contentious field. For the purposes of this literature review, only certain aspects of this topic can be discussed. This review includes an examination of the global trends in large-scale assessment, with a particular focus on the most recent developments. The review of global trends is followed by a more specific look at large-scale assessment in a Canadian context. This section of
the literature review concludes by reviewing large-scale assessment in Ontario, and focuses particularly on the OSSLT because of its importance to this study.

The next section of the literature review is an overview of the relationship between ELLs and large-scale assessment. The related research that is discussed in this section includes research concerned with reliability and validity, test anxiety, accommodations, as well as research specific to the experiences of ELLs who have taken the OSSLT. A general review of the education practices and concerns surrounding ELLs is also included in this section of the literature review, consisting of research on learning challenges that are unique to ELLs, the current situation of ELLs in Ontario’s public schools, as well as research that is exclusively concerned with Chinese ELLs and their learning patterns.

The globalization of education is discussed through a number of different lenses in this literature review. Because the globalization of education is such a broad category of research, I focus only on certain areas relevant to my study: the effects of globalization on Ontario’s education policies, as well as the effect of globalization on curriculum practices throughout the world in particular. In addition, discussion of the growing number of international schools is included in this section of the literature review. The research concerned with the rapidly increasing rate of international schools is relevant to this study because it provides relevant information regarding the current state of international schools and underscores an increasing need for research of this nature. International schools are often different from publicly-funded schools, therefore creating
a need for research in order to understand the distinctive nature of this type of school environment.

Finally, this literature review concludes with an examination of cultural literacy. This section is used to define cultural literacy in a specific manner, and present research that demonstrates the potential problems that “cultural illiteracy” can cause.

**Large-Scale Assessment**

The intent of many large-scale assessment programs is to place “an emphasis on standards, accountability and testing” (Levin, 1998, p. 133). The purpose of large-scale assessment is threefold: a form of accountability, an instrument for gatekeeping, and a tool for instructional diagnosis (Nagy, 2003). The three intents of large-scale assessment mean that even education systems that are dissimilar to one another often make use of large-scale assessments. Because of this, the research surrounding large-scale assessment has the potential to be both specific and broad in nature. There are a number of different manifestations of large-scale assessment: localized large-scale assessments (provincial or state), national large-scale assessments, and internationally utilized large-scale assessments. Often, a student participates in all three levels of large-scale assessment throughout their public schooling. I begin with a macro-review of large-scale assessment trends at a global level, followed by reviewing increasingly specific areas of large-scale assessment: large-scale assessment in Canada and then in Ontario, culminating with an overview of the more microcosmic research surrounding the OSSLT.
Global trends in large-scale assessment. The use of large-scale assessment in education is increasingly common throughout the world; not only are more nations using large-scale assessment, but the diversity of countries (i.e., countries that have vastly different populations, education systems, and extremely different philosophies of education) using large-scale assessment is also increasing (Klinger, DeLuca, & Miller, 2008; Sebatane, 2000). An increase in the use of large-scale assessment “has been a feature of reforms in many countries. Almost everywhere we find more large-scale testing of students and more reporting of the results of these tests than was the case a few years ago” (Levin, 1998, p. 133). According to Nagy (2000), large-scale assessment serves multiple purposes; because large-scale assessment can address issues of accountability, be used as a gatekeeping measure, or used as a tool of instructional diagnosis, education systems facing very disparate issues can turn to the same instrument as a solution. The ability of large-scale assessment to serve a number of ends is perhaps a contributing reason for the increase in its use. Another reason given for the increase in large-scale assessment is that the current educational climate means that countries are currently more aware of other countries’ practices than they previously were. This increase of awareness of external practices leads to mutual influence and changes in policy and practice in ways that were previously non-existent (Sebatane, 2000). Sebatane (2000) noted “considerable mutual influence on assessment systems takes place among industrialised nations” (p. 403). Industrial nations have influence over former colonies, as well as influence over nations without the capital to fund their own research. Countries
want “to ensure that the students acquire internationally recognised credentials” (p. 403). Overall, the current trend is the transfer of assessment practices from Western nations to developing nations (Sebatane, 2000). Critics of this practice noted the inherent dangers of privileging Western knowledge; while supporters of this practice emphasized that developing nations simply cannot afford the expense of creating their own unique programs (Crossley & Vulliamy, 1995; Sebatane, 2000). Large-scale assessments are becoming ubiquitous, yet are also being used in places for which they were not initially designed. Because education is becoming more globalized and internationalized, there is a growing concern that educators must heed should they wish to use large-scale assessments as validly and reliably as possible.

**Large-scale assessment in Canada.** Echoing the assessment trends throughout the world, the use of large-scale assessment in Canada has increased in both the number of large-scale assessments being used, and the purposes for which large-scale assessments are being used (Klinger et al., 2008). In Canada, “each provincial and territorial ministry of education oversees compulsory elementary and secondary schooling through... boards or districts of education” (Volante & Jafaar, 2008, p. 203). This means that no single, nation-wide large-scale assessment is administered by the Canadian government; instead, assessment varies according to provincial and territorial boundaries. Current research exploring large-scale assessment throughout Canada shows that, aside from Nunavut, all educational jurisdictions in Canada make use of some manifestation of large-scale assessment (Klinger et al., 2008). Although large-scale
assessment is utilized by most provinces and territories, “the format and purposes of these programs vary” (p. 3). Each province or territory has different assessments, and uses these assessments in a multitude of ways. The high-stakes large-scale assessment practices of British Columbia maintain a comprehensive program of examinations in every subject required so that students can qualify to graduate from secondary school (Volante & Jaafar, 2008). In addition, students take assessments in various subjects in grades 4, 7, 10, 11, and 12 (Volante & Jaafar, 2008). In comparison with British Columbia, the large-scale assessment practices of Prince Edward Island appear far less intensive. Common Assessments are used for mathematics and literacy in grades 3 and 9 respectively (Santrock, Woloshyn, Gallagher, DiPetta, & Marini, 2007). The differences between provincial and territorial assessment practices are numerous, yet commonalities exist as well. As Volante and Jaafar discuss, all Canadian assessment programs test the students in mathematics, reading, and writing. In addition to commonalities in subjects selected for assessment, these assessments “are developed and graded by Canadian teachers under the supervision and guidance of provincial/territorial assessment offices” (2008, p. 204). As noted by Gambell and Hunter (2004), because Canadian teachers have a large amount of control over the development, implementation, and scoring of the assessments, assessments are thought to be closely linked to classroom practices (Volante & Jaafar, 2008). Another factor thought to contribute to the similarities in large-scale assessment programs amongst the 13 Canadian provinces and territories that use them is global influence. As large-scale assessment becomes a method used by more educational
systems, Canada is, to a certain degree, simply a part of a larger trend. The assessment approaches used by Canadian provinces and territories “constitute a policy trend [that] echo the global changes in LSA policies” (Volante & Jaafar, 2008, p. 205).

**Large-scale assessment in Ontario.** Large-scale assessment in Ontario is unique in that it is the only Canadian province or territory using an arms-length agency, the Educational Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO), to administer the large-scale assessment programs within the province. The EQAO decides the content of the assessments as well as creates the grading system used for the assessments. Four separate assessments following the Ontario curriculum are administered to each student: at the elementary level, EQAO administers the Grades 3 and 6 Literacy and Numeracy Assessments, followed by the Grade 9 Numeracy Assessment. The aforementioned three large-scale assessments are not graduation requirements. Additionally, these three assessments are used to evaluate a student’s achievement in relation to subject-specific curriculum requirements. The results of these assessments do not have any bearing on whether or not a student is allowed to graduate to the next grade. The fourth and final EQAO assessment is the OSSLT, which takes place in Grade 10 and is the only assessment in the province that is a graduation requirement (Klinger et al., 2008).

**Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test.** The OSSLT began “in response to the 1994 recommendations of the Royal Commission on Learning” (EQAO Framework, 2006, p.1). First administered in 2002, the test is intended to measure whether students have “the literacy (reading and writing) skills required to meet the standard for
understanding reading selections and communicating in a variety of writing forms expected by The Ontario Curriculum across all subjects up to the end of Grade 9” (EQAO, 2006, p. 4). The OSSLT contains both reading and writing questions, separated into two booklets. Each section of the test has a 75-minute time limit, with a break between booklets. Questions on the OSSLT vary in format: multiple choice, open-response questions related to the reading sections, a short open-response writing task, and two long-response writing tasks (EQAO, 2006). Students are required to pass the OSSLT in order to satisfy the requirements of the OSSD. If a student is not successful passing the test the first time they write it, they may re-write the test the following year. Another alternative is available should the school principal deem it appropriate: a student may enroll in the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Course (OSSLC) as an alternative means of satisfying the literacy requirement. Although some students are permitted accommodations for the test, these students must already have had these accommodations identified for them through an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) (EQAO Framework, 2006). The IEP process can sometimes be lengthy in nature, which is potentially problematic for students arriving in Ontario as secondary school-aged students who may have not been in the Ontario education system long enough for a formal IEP identification process to take place.

**International assessment programs in Canada.** Another factor demonstrating the influence of globalization is the use of international assessments in Canada. Because of the increase in Canada’s immigrant population, this translates into an increasing
number of ELLs in Canada’s education system (Statistics Canada, 2006). In the past decade, the number of students that were born outside of Canada, including permanent and temporary residents (with temporary residents including temporary foreign students, foreign workers, humanitarian and refugee claimants) in Canada’s elementary and secondary schools has increased (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2010). In 2001, 31,629 permanent and temporary students born outside of Canada were being educated in Canada’s elementary and secondary schools; by 2010, that number had grown to 35,118 (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2010). This number does not include those students born in Canada who fall into the category of Canadian-born ELL. Certain parts of Canada are involved with international assessment programs in addition to their provincial and territorial assessments. Quebec, Ontario, and Alberta are involved with the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), as well as the Progress in International Reading and Literacy (PIRLS). PISA, TIMSS, and PIRLS are “administered by well-established global organisations, are in addition to the national assessment program, the School Achievement Indicators Programme (SAIP) that is conducted in all Canadian provinces” (Volante & Jaafar, p. 203). While not all provinces and territories have adopted international assessments, Canada’s involvement with the above mentioned assessments is certainly demonstrative of the growing trend toward these assessment results driving education-related policy decisions (Volante & Cherubini, 2010). The combination of an increase in the use of large-scale testing and the growing number of
ELLs being educated in Canada means that the issues that are associated with ELLs and large-scale assessment (which will be discussed in detail further in this chapter) are going to affect a larger number of students in Canada. Perhaps even more important than focusing on the number of students currently affected by the OSSLT, understanding the potential effect to future students may be more important. Because international large-scale assessments are often used as an instrument to guide future education policies, it is imperative that these decisions are based on accurate, reliable, and valid test results (Volante & Cherubini, 2010).

**Educator attitudes concerning assessment in Canada.** As with most topics connected to education, controversy surrounds the role of large-scale assessment in Canada. Limited research exists concerning the outcomes of large-scale assessment for individual educators, yet the publication of school-specific results has caused some educators to feel that large-scale assessments “represented a judgement of teachers’ competence” (Gambell & Hunter, 2004, p. 705). Canadian educators also believe that “large-scale assessments remain peripheral at best to teachers’ day-to-day classroom concerns” (Gambell & Hunter, 2004, p.719).

**Summary.** From my review of literature about large-scale assessment, it is clear that large-scale assessment is being used in an increasing number of ways, and also in an increasing number places (Klinger et al., 2008). Large-scale assessment is being implemented in ways that demonstrate the effect globalization has had on education: the large-scale assessment practices of developed nations are being used in nations that are
still developing (Sebatane, 2000). Within Canada, different kinds of large-scale assessment programs are being used, with each province and territory claiming its own unique use of assessments (Klinger et al., 2008). Ontario’s large-scale assessment program has only one assessment (the OSSLT) that secondary students must pass in order to graduate. The research reviewed indicates that the OSSLT presents ELLs with a unique set of challenges, affecting the reliability and validity of the test (Doe et al., 2011; Fox & Cheng, 2007).

**English Language Learners (ELLs)**

In the context of Ontario’s curriculum and policies, an ELL is defined as being a student whose first language is not English, or is a kind of English that differs considerably from the English used in Ontario’s classrooms (English Language Learners: ESL and ELD Programs and Services, 2007). These are students “who may require focused educational supports to assist them in attaining proficiency in English” (English Language Learners: ESL and ELD Programs and Services, 2007, p. 8). Although my research involves Chinese students still living in China, I use this definition because these students are being educated with Ontario’s curriculum and courses and by Ontario trained and certified teachers.

Learning a second language and learning within a second language are both transformative experiences for young learners (Aoki, 2005). In many cases, these language experiences are happening simultaneously with learning the cultural norms that come with moving to a new country. Learning a second, or third, language is
transformative as it not only alters a learner’s “relationship to the world, but rather enrich[es] and extend[s] it through the world of the foreign language” (p. 240).

**Challenges for ELLs.** Research has demonstrated a connection between a student’s first language, identity, and academic success. Students with a strong sense of their native language and identity have academic success and student empowerment (Cummins, 2001, Lemberger, 1996). Unfortunately, ELLs are often stigmatized in a variety of ways, with schools often viewing “immigrants, refugees, and ethnic minority students as being homogeneous, and often from a deficit, negative perspective due to their linguistic and cultural differences (Clark & Flores, 2007, p. 9).

Students coming into to an unfamiliar school system often feel out of place and experience what Coelho (2004) referred to as a “silent period”. In an academic context, the “silent period” presents obvious challenges for ELLs and those who teach ELLs. For ELLs, the inability or simply lack of desire to communicate in English with their teacher can be frustrating (Coelho). For teachers, the “silent period” can create difficulty when trying to assess an ELL’s prior knowledge, but it does not mean that a student is not learning during this period. Although the “silent period” can be challenging for educators and students alike, research indicates that this is an expected part of language acquisition (Coelho). ELLs are tasked with the twofold exercise of “learning English and learning to use English for curriculum purposes” (Leung & Lewkowicz, 2008, p. 302). This means that many ELLs are learning English for both social and academic situations, which “can add considerable demand to the challenges faced by individual students” (p. 302).
Research indicates that instructional methods that are appropriate for native English speakers may not work as well for ELLs. Moreover, the process of learning a new skill is mediated by the previous learning structures that have been used to learn a skill in a student’s first language (Aoki, 2005; Bernhardt, 2003; Usman, 2009). Even “the mere existence of a first-language (regardless of whether it is only oral, or oral and literate) renders the second-language reading process considerably different from the first-language reading process because of the nature of information stored in memory” (Bernhardt, 2003, p.112). The understanding that prior linguistic knowledge is an impediment to learning a new language is, however, not universally accepted. Positive aspects of literacy and knowledge of another language are discussed in a separate section of this literature review.

Challenges are also in relation to ELLs in regard to testing: in many cultures, students have not been exposed to the kind of testing that has become an increasingly large part of the education system in North America (Usman, 2009). More than simply the act of acquiring new knowledge, educators, policy makers, and test creators must remember that learning “a second language is indeed coming to know a second way of entering a new world. As such, it goes far beyond learning a new language as merely a preexistent tool for designating a world already somehow familiar” (Aoki, 2005, p. 239). Although Usman discusses many types of test formats, specific consideration regarding the relationship between ELLs and large-scale assessment appears in a later section of this literature review.
Students experiencing education in one language and home life in another language are often described as feeling caught between two worlds (Chan, 2007). In addition, students may experience academic or social pressure to use English in lieu of their first language. Unfortunately, this can have a negative, and perhaps surprising, effect. Multiple studies have demonstrated that continuing to learn and improve a student’s first language ability is imperative for a student’s success in a new language; the stronger the first language skills are, the greater ease students tend to have when learning a new language (Clark & Flores, 2008). The personal impact of diminished first language ability can be problematic for ELLs. In addition to the academic issues connected with first language loss, many ELLs are being introduced to a new social culture through education in Ontario. In a study concerned with the education of refugees in British Columbia, Usman stated that students coming from different cultures have a “previous learning orientation, and knowledge base”, often in direct contrast with the values espoused by Canadian curriculum (2009, p. 162). In fact, “many English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners encounter the frustration that their teachers’ teaching does not appeal to their own learning preferences because most teachers teach the way they learn” (Wang, 2007). The activities, assessments, and learning opportunities that are a part of Ontario’s curriculum may present an ELL with difficulties that are unanticipated, and often unintended by teachers and students. In-class tasks like group work, classroom-wide discussions, or writing an opinion piece may seem uncomplicated to other students, but may present some ELLs with an uncomfortable social situation. In
order to ease students into a new language and culture, “native language and identity should be validated and acknowledged in the school setting” (Clark & Flores, 2007, p. 8).

**Advantages for ELLs.** Although learning in a language other than one’s first language can be daunting, research has continually demonstrated many benefits of being multilingual. Multilingualism has both academic and personal benefits (Cummins & Schecter, 2006; Lee & Oxelson, 2006). Research also indicates that prior linguistic knowledge is beneficial to learning a second language. Skill transfer from a first language to a second language often occurs, allowing ELLs to draw on prior knowledge when learning English (Cummins & Schecter, 2003; Watts-Taffe & Truscott, 2000).

Additionally, bi or multilingualism creates emotional, cognitive, and linguistic advantages (Cummins & Schecter, 2003). For this reason, the importance of an ELL’s grasp of their first language cannot be over-emphasized. First language literacy is often cited as a predictor of an ELL’s success, yet a study by Lee and Oxelson indicated indifference from most educators toward helping the student maintain their first language (2006).

ELLS may experience advantages beyond the individual emotional, cognitive, and linguistic benefits. In a classroom context, ELLs often inspire teachers to provide learning opportunities that are more complex and challenging (Hawkins, 2004). In practice, ELLs can create a community that will help all students “learn to negotiate very different social worlds” (p. 21). Hawkins noted that the presence of an ELL in a classroom promotes the Vygotskian principles of learning: by encountering a new
perspective, students are able to “acquire/construct new forms of interaction, language, and thinking” (Hawkins, 2004, p. 16).

**Chinese ELLs.** Research has cautioned against defining all ELLs in the same manner. For this reason, examining research specifically concerning the Chinese ELL is vital for this study. Although it is problematic to generalize ELLs, there are learning patterns that are often present for students who speak Mandarin or Cantonese as their first language. Chinese ELLs of various English abilities have demonstrated a particular need for assistance with sociolinguistic competence, vocabulary, and specific linguistic knowledge related to learning English (Pu, 2010). In order to become fluent, Chinese ELLs require “language and literacy development consist[ing] of both linguistic skills and sociocultural competence on the symbolic representation of meaning” (p. 140). Similar to ELLs from various groups, they have increased anxiety regarding learning and assessment in English. In a study about Chinese ELLs and communication anxiety, “more than one third of the participants felt anxious in their English language classrooms” (Liu & Jackson, 2008, p. 82). Liu and Jackson concluded that participants’ anxiety was likely due to participants’ fears of being poorly evaluated, therefore causing participants to feel “apprehensive of speech communication and tests” (2008, p. 82).

Suggestions for combating the increased anxiety Chinese ELLs perceive in relation to communication abound. Liu and Jackson recommended discussing the “significance of speech communication in class and share with them the feeling of anxiety experienced by many people when they learn” (p. 82). A great deal of emphasis
is on the importance of the reduction of anxiety to improve actual ability. A connection exists between students’ perceptions of their English proficiency and their ability to perform in English (speak, read, or write). A student underrating his or her English language ability can cause difficulty or an inability to perform in the newly acquired language (MacIntyre, Noels, & Clement, 1997). For Chinese ELLs’ language acquisition, a negative “perception may lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy” (Liu & Jackson, 2008, p. 82). Emphasizing the importance of practice is essential. Chinese ELLs “need to practice using/speaking English both in and outside the classroom, with different people, and in a range of situations. This practice can help them become more confident and at ease when using and talking in English with others in various contexts” (p. 82). They suggested that Chinese ELLs fear failure, therefore causing potential anxieties and difficulties in relation to demonstrating their ability (2008).

**Summary.** The reviewed research about ELLs reveals one of the primary areas of concern: although researchers emphasize the need to distinguish the needs of ELLs, much of the research categorizes an exceptionally diverse group of learners as one. Recent studies have indicated the need for research that addresses the complexity and differences that exists under the catch-all title of “ELL” (Clark & Flores, 2007). This is not to say that there is no value in research looking at ELLs as a singular entity; the language acquisition process, regardless of a student’s first language, does unite ELLs. Educating ELLs requires knowledge of the unique learning process these students often go through during the language acquisition process (Coelho, 2004; Hawkins, 2004). Studies looking
specifically at Chinese ELLs focused on the tendency toward anxiety; learning characteristics such as increased anxiety when speaking and/or being tested in English were observed (Liu & Jackson, 2008; MacIntyre et al., 2007; Pu, 2010). It is clear that research about ELLs in the broadest sense should always be supplemented by research about ELLs in a specific sense.

**English Language Learners and Large-Scale Assessment**

Within this section of the literature review, an assortment of subtopics are discussed in relation to ELLs and large-scale assessment. This section of the literature review begins with an examination of the issues of reliability and validity that large-scale assessments present for ELLs. This section describes the causes of these issues, and also reviews research-approved methods intended to counteract or minimize the issues of reliability and validity.

The next topic reviewed is the anxiety ELLs report having concerning large-scale assessments. Compared with their peers who speak English as a first language, the reviewed literature examines some of the implications of test-related anxiety.

The following section of the literature review is an overview of the research-approved accommodations that can be used to minimize problems relating to reliability and validity.

Because this study is centred on ELLs and the OSSLT, the final section of this literature review is devoted to this specific large-scale assessment. Within this section of the literature review, connections to the three previous subtopics that were reviewed
(issues of reliability and validity, test anxiety, and accommodations) are connected to ELLs and the OSSLT in particular.

**Issues of reliability and validity.** Many researchers have pointed out that large-scale assessments like the OSSLT can cause difficulty in relation to reliably measuring an ELL’s ability (Abedi, 2004; Fox & Cheng, 2007). Evidence suggests “that many of the tests that are currently being used are not entirely appropriate for the task of measuring the academic knowledge, skills, and abilities of ELLs due to confounding of language ability and content knowledge (Fairbairn & Fox, 2009, p. 11). This is partially explained by the manner in which most tests are designed. Creators of large-scale assessments commonly use “criteria that are used to assess all students which are usually modeled on first language development and performance of the language majority population in society” (Leung & Lewkowicz, 2008, p. 304). An increasing amount of research is being devoted to addressing the “growing concerns that English proficiency might be a source of construct-irrelevant variance undermining measurement accuracy” (Fairbairn & Fox, 2009, p. 12). Another troubling issue is that “the language load of the test items might introduce a bias into the assessment” (Abedi et al., 2000; 2005, p. 8). This means that for ELLs, the vocabulary and language used on the test “might be a source of measurement error” (Abedi et al., 2005; 2008, p. 8). As the ELL population educated through Ontario’s curriculum continues to grow, research that is specific to the Ontario curriculum’s educational context increases in value. In fact, Fairbairn and Fox suggested that a local perspective would be useful for further research concerning the
assessments and evaluation of second language learners (2009). The majority of existing research that is connected to ELLs and large-scale assessment has been conducted in relation to the current American No Child Left Behind policy that began in 2000. Although undeniably similarities exist between the changes that are happening to the student populations of Canada and the United States, it is important that research be conducted specific to Canada’s context as well. Some researchers understand this phenomenon, noting that “tests are not developed and used in a value-free psychometric test-tube; they are virtually always intended to serve the needs of an educational system or of society at large” (Bachman, 1990, p. 279). If this understanding of many large-scale assessments is accepted, it suggests a different issue surrounding large-scale assessments: perhaps assessment creators need to acknowledge the importance of cultural knowledge.

**Increased anxiety for ELL test-takers.** Fox and Cheng’s 2007 study delved into the perceptions of ELLs taking the OSSLT. The researchers noted that a common reaction to the test is a level of anxiety that is notably higher than the self-reported stress associated with the test by their first language peers. The vocabulary used by ELLs to discuss the test with the researchers was decidedly negative; adjectives used to describe feelings toward the test included “sad, angry, or frustrated” (p. 20). The connection between foreign language learning and anxiety is complex, and refers to “the feeling of tension and apprehension specifically associated with second language [L2] contexts, including speaking, listening, and learning” (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994, p. 284). Anxiety connected to learning in another language affects test-takers’ performances.
negatively, impeding their ability to accurately demonstrate the true depth of their knowledge (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986).

Language proficiency, linguistic complexity, and accommodations. In an attempt to reduce the issue of language proficiency on tests purporting to measure other content, researchers have focused efforts toward finding appropriate accommodations to allow ELLs to fully demonstrate understanding and learning on a test. If “instructional materials contain complex linguistic structures, ELL students may be faced with serious difficulty in following such instruction and understanding the content of instruction” (Abedi, 2009, p. 170). Linguistic complexity may mean that “ELL students with a fair level of knowledge of the content may not perform well not because of a lack of content knowledge, but because of difficulty understanding the assessment questions” (p. 170). Though the exact measurable effect of an assessment’s linguistic complexity is unclear, what is clear is that “the gap between ELL and non-ELL students increases as the language load of the assessment tools increases” (Abedi et al., 2000; 2005, p. 39). This factor also results in the gap widening between ELL and non-ELL students as they progress through the education system. As students are promoted through subsequent grades, the language load of content assessments increases (Abedi et al., 2000; 2005).

One method of reducing the “impact of language factors in ELL students’ performance outcomes….is linguistic modification” (Abedi, 2009, p. 172). Reducing linguistic complexity means lessening the language aspects of the test that are not essential to the question being asked (Abedi). Fairbairn and Fox emphatically stated that
this process should “not be confused with ‘dumbing down’ standards”, but as a way to address the possible measurement error resulting from a student writing a test in a second language (2009, p.17). They suggested that, because “ELLs may come from contexts in which large-scale selected response testing is uncommon, special preparatory materials for ELLs may be warranted” (p. 18). Although researchers have investigated a number of accommodations (Appendix A), some had absolutely no measureable effect on ELL test performance (Fairbairn & Fox, 2009). It is clear that when accommodations are offered, those charged with selecting how ELL students will be accommodated for issues of language proficiency must be aware that some accommodations are more effective than others. Without proper understanding of the impact of accommodations, allowing ELLs to use inappropriate accommodations becomes a very hollow gesture.

**English Language Learners and the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test.**

Although the OSSLT is intended to measure literacy across a number of subjects, ELLs perceive the test simply as an English ability test (Fox & Cheng, 2007; Klinger & Luce-Kapler, 2007). As previously mentioned, anxiety is already heightened for learners writing an assessment in a second language. Because the OSSLT is perceived as a test of English ability, researchers have noted that this would explain the test anxiety observed in connection with the test (Doe et al, 2011).

Because of the limited research and information available about this rapidly-expanding kind of school, only an estimated number of overseas students who write the test in China on a yearly basis was possible. In China alone, the 2011-reported number of
Ontario curriculum based schools (10) was used to estimate the number of Chinese ELLs writing the OSSLT while living in China on a yearly basis. Given the possibility of multiple campuses per school and the larger class sizes that are common in China, the estimated number of Chinese ELLs writing the OSSLT while still living in China is somewhere between 1000-5000.

**Summary.** The complexity of accurately assessing ELLs is made apparent by the review of the literature about the relationship between ELLs and large-scale assessment. For ELLs, issues of reliability and validity are always present in large-scale assessments (Abedi, 2004; Bailey et al., 2000, 2005; Fox & Cheng, 2007). Attempts to improve the reliability and validity should always be based in research: all accommodations are not created equally (Abedi, 2009; Rivera & Collum, 2004).

**Globalization of Education**

The globalization of education can be defined in many ways. For the purposes of this study, the globalization of education is defined as the all of the “the worldwide discussions, processes, and institutions affecting local education practices and policies” (Spring, 2009, p. 1). This section also incorporates aspects of the internationalization of education relevant to this study; internationalization “is changing the world of education and globalisation is changing the world of internationalisation” (King, 2003, p. 3). Internationalization in education is centred on the positive aspects that are often a result of a globalized world. Internationalization is focused on honouring the cultural differences and customs that exist between different nations and is characterized by an
optimistic opening of a global discourse regarding education (Currie, DeAngelis, Boer, Huisman, & Lacotte, 2003; Gacel-Avila, 2005). Although the connection between internationalization and this study may at first appear somewhat tenuous, the intent of this study is to focus on the entire experiences of the Chinese ELL, not simply the challenges. Incorporating the positive experiences of the test-taker is as important as any challenge experienced by the test-taker. For this reason, internationalization-related research is included in this literature review.

**Effects of globalization on Ontario’s schools.** One of the most visible effects of the globalization of education in Ontario is the change embedded in the cultural makeup of Ontario’s schools. In 2010, 35,118 ELLs were being educated in Canada’s elementary and secondary schools (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2010). Although the number of ELLs being educated in Canada is large in itself, Ontario is “the Canadian province that has consistently received the greatest number of new immigrants (Fairbairn & Fox, 2009, p. 10). In 2010, the total number of both temporary and permanent immigrants arriving in Canada was 280 681, with 118 113 or 42% of the total number of immigrants coming to Ontario (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2010).

Although Ontario has been a popular destination for immigrants, newcomers, and international students for decades, formal policy related to the education of English Language Learners is relatively recent (English Language Learners: ESL and ELD Programs and Services, 2007). The recommendations and requirements outlined in this policy are evidence of globalization in Ontario’s secondary schools, as it promotes
education that is “inclusive in nature and… reflect[s] diverse points of view and experiences that help students to become more sensitive to the experiences and perceptions of others” (Sharpe, 2011, p. 53). Correspondingly, this document is “promoting such notions as innovation, global citizenship, and lifelong learning” (p. 321), which Pan states is a change that is a result of the globalization of education.

**Effects of globalization on curriculum.** With the ever-changing demographics of classrooms around the world, there is a movement to change the standards that dictate what knowledge is learned, valued, assessed, and canonized through curriculum. Questioning the official knowledge is especially important for multicultural classrooms. In a study done on teaching in multicultural classrooms, one teacher noted the “struggles many of her students experience in relating to a curriculum which elevates middle class White culture and identity” (Camp & Oesterreich, 2010, p. 21). Other researchers claimed that a move toward a more personalized curriculum is required if educators can hope to engage their students. Knowing and understanding “the particular histories of each child in order to identify both his or her cultural group and his or her specific history” are important for student success (Chan, 2007, p. 178).

**The reach of Ontario’s curriculum.** Before the Ontario Ministry of Education began allowing schools overseas to grant the OSSD, graduating from secondary school with an OSSD used to mean that a student had successfully graduated from a secondary school in Ontario. In 2011, this is no longer the case. As of August 2011, the Ontario Ministry of Education lists 20 schools, some with multiple campuses, that have been
inspected and certified by the Ontario Ministry of Education to grant the OSSD. Indeed, this is evidence of how globalization has affected education. Curriculum designed for students attending school in Ontario (sometimes even covering localized topics) is now being used in many countries outside of Canada. The Netherlands, Italy, Trinidad and Tobago, Singapore, Egypt, St. Maarten, Japan, China, Hong Kong, Switzerland, and Malaysia all host at least one international school that the Ontario Ministry of Education has certified (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2011). Accordingly, students well beyond the geographical boundaries of Ontario are writing a provincial literacy test. Yet research warns that “assessment, and examinations in particular, should be understood in the context in which they operate” (Sebatane, 2000, p. 410). Obviously, this is not so with respect to the OSSLT.

**Internationalization of education.** In a Canadian context, the internationalization of education has resulted in the “the increasing enrolment of international students in Canadian institutions of higher education” (Guo & Chase, 2011, p. 306). In 2011, international students “account for 20% of total graduate level enrolment in Canada” (p. 306). Because the intent of the research surrounding the internationalization of education is intended to note the positive effects that have resulted in the exchange of educational practices, considerable research focuses on the “overwhelmingly positive learning experiences” that international students experience (p. 314). Additionally, learning opportunities are extended beyond the students; the
“tremendous knowledge and experience they brought into the classroom through discussion” were equally valuable to educators (p. 314).

The internationalization of education also serves as evidence of the economic aspects of the globalization of education. The understanding of education as a means to generate profit is one of the most contentious aspects connected to the internationalization and globalization of education (Spring, 2009).

**Summary.** The globalization of education is a vast phenomenon affecting diverse nations, cultures, and education systems (King, 2003; Spring, 2009). The globalization of education has led to research that suggests that changes must be made to curricula that support an increasingly diverse student population (Usman, 2009). Beyond changes to curricular content, the globalization of education has led to recognition that teaching methods, pedagogical technologies, and even the language in which a student is instructed. (Usman, 2009). Within Canada, an examination of the numbers alone, the increasing population of ELLs being educated in Canada’s schools begins to illustrate the effect globalization has had on the demographics of Canadian classrooms. In Ontario, the effect globalization has had on educational policy is visible through a perusal of the curriculum and policy documents created by the Ministry of Education, with entire policy documents being created in order to meet the needs of students who have increasingly diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds (English Language Learners: ESL and ELD Programs and Services policy document, 2007).
Cultural Literacy

Cultural literacy encompasses the knowledge that an individual has in relation to a specific culture’s idioms, colloquialisms, allusions, and content that is often non-academic in nature (Hirsch, 1987). Although Hirsch intended his definition of cultural literacy to take on a positive, prescriptive meaning, in that his research and writing suggested various literature, themes, colloquialism, historical events, and Western-centric concepts that Americans must know in order to be considered literate, other researchers accepted Hirsch’s definition of cultural literacy but rejected the notion that the onus was on those who were culturally illiterate to change. Instead, many researchers suggested that there should be a shift toward valuing the knowledge of those individuals with a non-Western-centric cultural literacy (Camp & Oesterreich, 2010). Educators in general have embraced various techniques meant to honour the diverse knowledge that multiculturalism brings to schools. Undertakings such as multicultural curriculum and anti-racist curriculum demonstrate the rejection much of Hirsch’s prescription for literacy (Camp & Oesterreich, 2010; Chan, 2007; Hanson, 2010). Textbooks have been updated to contain more diverse perspectives, school regulations and holidays have been revised to reflect the change in the demographics of their student populations, and educators are taught to be sensitive to the multiple perspectives that may be encountered in a multicultural and multilingual classroom (Camp & Oesterreich, 2010). An inclusive way of re-defining literacy would remove the requisite knowledge of the dominant culture. Understanding literacy in this manner is in direct conflict with Hirsch’s beliefs.
concerning cultural literacy, yet it is in this direction many educators and educational researchers are moving toward regarding curricular content and classroom teaching practices (Camp & Oesterreich, 2010; Usman, 2009). Many educators believe that current “literacy education research should be concerned with creating cultures in which no boundary is empirically critical” (Hwang, 2009, p. 197). However, there are certainly educators who support teaching and valuing cultural literacy because of its importance across academic subjects and outside the classroom. Cultural literacy, because of “its multidisciplinary nature (…) could perhaps integrate, rather than fragment, the curriculum” (Moyer, 2011, p. 41). Moyer did not believe that educators are doing students any favours by embracing multiple literacies because of the possible negative future effect on a student’s lifelong adaptability. One of the facets of lifelong adaptability that is negatively affected by cultural illiteracy is a student’s ability to perform on a large-scale assessment, particularly one like the OSSLT. Hirsch, then, would not be surprised to learn that ELLs struggle with a test that measures literacy noting that illiteracy “is not merely a deficiency in reading and writing, skills. It is also a deficiency in cultural information” (Hirsch, 1981, p. 10).

**Summary.** Cultural literacy is certainly a divisive topic; this review of literature includes both perspectives held by researchers: those who value teaching students the kind of information that cultural literacy is comprised of, and those who believe educators ought not to be evaluating cultural literacy at all. While there is dissent regarding the appropriateness of teaching cultural literacy, the existence of cultural
literacy is agreed upon, as are the challenges students who are not proficient in the dominant culture’s idioms, colloquialisms, and informal content will face.

**Conclusion**

My literature review began with an overview of large-scale assessment. This section of the literature review demonstrated that use of large-scale assessment is increasing, and that countries that have never before used large-scale assessment are incorporating it into their education systems (Klinger et al., 2008; Sebatane, 2000). The review of literature related to large-scale assessment also demonstrated that this increase in use has also led to potential issues resulting from the direct, non-specific transfer of assessment practices from one education system to another: what is an appropriate assessment vehicle for one country may not be for another. This review of large-scale assessment also looks at the Canadian and Ontarian perspectives, sharing the perspectives of Canadian educators about large-scale assessment and providing an overview of how large-scale assessment is used in each province and territory. Finally, because of its central importance to my study, my review of the literature looked specifically at the OSSLT; this literature focused on the added difficulties faced by ELLs writing the OSSLT (Zheng et al., 2007; Doe et al., 2011; Fox & Cheng, 2007). I contend that my review of large-scale assessment demonstrates the need for a study such as mine: the kind of study that enables a deeper understanding of an assessment in a specific context for a specific group of students. This brings me to the next part of my literature review: a synthesis of the literature about ELLs.
Just as the use of large-scale assessment is increasing in Canada, my review of pertinent literature shows the number of ELLs being educated in Canada is also increasing (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2010). In another parallel with research surrounding large-scale assessment that demonstrates the importance of using this kind of assessment in a specific context, my review of the literature about ELLs demonstrates the need for further research that focuses on the diversity of needs and perspectives held by ELLs (Clark & Flores, 2007). Examining the literature about Chinese ELLs, it became apparent that one of the needs that this group of learners has is confidence-related. Anxiety and low confidence related to speaking and being tested in English was something that was uniformly reported in the research I reviewed. The relation between anxiety and learning in a second language also connects to the next area of literature I reviewed: the relationship between ELLs and large-scale assessment.

The dynamic between ELLs and large-scale assessment is, unsurprisingly, complex; the reviewed literature often focused on issues of reliability and validity, increased test-taking anxiety, and the difficulty in finding appropriate accommodations for ELLs. I assert that these issues are strongly related to problems resulting from a lack of cultural literacy, another section in this literacy review, and I contend that my study should help to address the inadequate amount of literature that connects the areas of large-scale assessment, ELLs, and cultural literacy.

On its own, cultural literacy is an area of research that is challenging. Discussing cultural literacy in relation to its role in education is admittedly complex; my review of
literature of cultural literacy and education demonstrates the limited, sometimes dated nature of the research available. My review of the literature revealed that certain perspectives—specifically those that champion the inclusion of cultural literacy as a viable area of knowledge to be tested on—are currently being confronted by a classroom that contains increasingly diverse students. This diversity is a trend in demographics that shows no signs of slowing; with the classroom showing the signs and effects of globalization, I suggest that an awareness of how cultural literacy can affect students is an area which merits further research.

The globalization of education is perhaps the topic that connects the previously discussed topics of large-scale assessment, ELLs, and cultural literacy. The globalization of education is, at least partially, responsible for the increasingly shared practice of large-scale assessment. The globalization of education also explains the increase in ELLs throughout classrooms around the world. In relation to cultural literacy, the globalization of education explains the need for a re-evaluation of issues (like large-scale assessment or curriculum standards) that are affected by cultural literacy. The globalization of education has manifested in a number of tangible ways: changes to education policy and accordingly curriculum documents, the existence of and increase in international schools, the existence of global large-scale assessments, specifically the increase in ELLs in schools in Canada.

Although this literature review is divided thematically, the overlapping nature of these topics of research is evident. I expected this same feature, that is, the overlapping of
themes, to therefore present itself in the findings of this study. When attempting to discuss the state of education in Ontario, it is impossible to ignore the impact that the globalization of education has had on curriculum, policy, and makeup of the student population. Research concerning the connection between globalization and Ontario’s curriculum almost inevitably leads to an examination of the increase in overseas schools using Ontario’s curriculum, which leads into a discussion of the best educational practices for teaching the ELLs who often populate said overseas schools. Within the discussion of best practice for the instruction of ELLs, the topic of assessment and evaluation and the singular considerations that ELLs require are certainly merited. Any discussion of assessment and evaluation almost certainly includes the topic of large-scale assessment; within the topic of large-scale assessment, educators within Ontario will often discuss the only large-scale assessment that is required for graduation: the OSSLT. This cycle is demonstrative of the inherently connected themes that surround many discussions concerned with education, and also illustrates the multifaceted character of any research that seeks the perspectives of ELLs on a large-scale assessment like the OSSLT.

In addition to the interconnected nature of the reviewed areas of research, the literature reviewed demonstrates a need for further research a number of areas. Two key areas stand out more than others: research that addresses ELLs in a specific, nuanced way, and research that seeks to understand large-scale assessments from the perspective of the test-taker. This study engages with both of these issues, and therefore is an attempt
at minimizing the existing research gap. I highlight both the growing number of Chinese ELLs being educated in Ontario, and the number of Chinese ELLs being educated through Ontario’s curriculum while living outside of the province.
Chapter 3
Methodology

This chapter explains the methodology that I used to carry out and analyze my research. This chapter discusses the research instruments, the research site, and the study’s participants, then reviews the research questions and the research procedures. Finally, this chapter concludes with a summary of how the collected data were analyzed.

In order to understand: 1) how do Chinese ELLs taking the OSSLT perceive the tasks required on the OSSLT; and 2) how do issues of culturally embedded knowledge affect their ability to take the test successfully. I used an exploratory, qualitative design to seek students’ perspectives. Students involved in the study were asked to participate in two interactive phases of research. Participants first took part in completing a test question taken from the OSSLT samples provided by EQAO. The test question that was selected was a news report (Appendix B). The OSSLT’s news report test question was selected because Zheng et al. (2007) found this test question to have the largest performance gap between ELLs and their peers who speak English as their first language. After completing the news report test question, students then participated in a focus group where they were asked to respond to semi-structured questions (Appendix C). While the participants worked on the writing activity, I observed and noted students’ actions and questions concerning the activity. Upon completion of the activity, the participants’ writing was collected and assessed using the EQAO scoring guide (Appendix D) and was also analyzed for connections with the guiding focus group questions. This research was
intended to explore how Chinese ELLs deciphered and created understanding from a writing activity that may have challenged their cultural and/or background knowledge embedded in literacy. The focus group allowed students to reflect on their thought process while conducting the writing task, and asked students to identify any challenges, should they have encountered any, that they perceived when they participated in the news report test question phase of the study.

**Instruments**

*Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test.* The OSSLT was the instrument that guided this study. Although the participants in this study only engaged with one section of the OSSLT, the entire test is comprised of two booklets with multiple activities. Introduced by EQAO in 2001, the test is intended to measure literacy.

The complete test consists of two separate booklets. During the actual test, students are given 75 minutes for each booklet, separated by a 15-minute break, and conclude with an additional 10 minutes to answer a questionnaire. The test booklets contain various items intended to test the reading and writing level that students are anticipated to attain by the end of grade 9. The OSSLT uses 31 multiple-choice reading questions that are connected to five reading selections, four open-response writing items, eight multiple-choice writing items, two short open-response writing tasks, and two long open-response writing questions (which take the form of expressing an opinion through a series of paragraphs, and a newspaper article report) (EQAO, 2011).
The test items are intended to measure specific reading and writing skills outlined by EQAO. The OSSLT focuses on measuring three reading skills throughout the test. The specific skills measured are the comprehension of “explicitly stated information and ideas[,] understanding implicitly stated information and ideas (i.e., making inferences)[,] making connections between information and ideas in a reading selection and personal knowledge and experience (i.e., interpreting reading selections by integrating the information and ideas in a reading selection with personal knowledge and experience)” (EQAO, 2011). The types of reading texts used in the OSSLT to measure the aforementioned skills are “narrative, informational and graphic reading selections” (EQAO, 2011).

The OSSLT also selects three writing skills to measure: the ability to develop a main idea with supporting details, “organizing information and ideas in a coherent manner[, and] using conventions (i.e., spelling, grammar, punctuation) in a manner that does not distract from clear communication” (EQAO, 2011). The OSSLT uses multiple-choice questions, two short open-response questions, and two long open-response questions to measure the three selected writing skills.

One of the reasons this study is focused on the OSSLT is that it is one of the 32 requirements that are mandatory for students to graduate with an OSSD. Of the graduation requirements, the OSSLT is the only large-scale assessment that students are required to take. If a student fails the literacy test in grade 10, a student is able to re-write the test in grade 11. If the student fails the test in grade 11, two options are available to
the student. One path the student may follow is to attempt the test for a third time. As this will be taking place in March of grade 12, which should be a student’s final year of high school education in Ontario, a student jeopardizes their graduation date. The second option available to students is to take the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Course (OSSLT). In some cases, a student may be permitted to enroll in the OSSLT after attempting the OSSLT once if the school principal considers this path the best option to ensure student success (EQAO, 2011). Because research indicates that ELLs have a lower success rate when writing the OSSLT, Cohen (2007) and Fox and Cheng (2007) attested that the ELLs should be a subject of research. The ELL community being educated with Ontario’s curriculum is growing both within the province’s schools and in the overseas schools using the Ontario curriculum (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2011).

**News report test question.** The selected writing activity that participants completed was a news report (See Appendix B). The news report test question required students to examine a given photograph and a title, and make a connection that allowed them to write a news report that included the information of who, what, where, when, why, and how. With the format of the activity being identical to the test itself, participants were be given a 45-minute period to complete the news report test question. This specific task from the OSSLT was selected because of previous research demonstrating this task as particularly problematic for ELLs (Fox & Cheng, 2007). After examining all of the tasks separately to compare the performances of ELLs and native English speakers, Cheng, Fox, and Zheng (2007) found that “the narrative reading and
the news report test questions most distinctively separated the L2 (ESL/ELD) and L1 (non-ESL/ELD) groups in their test performance” (p. 78).

The news report test question is embedded with issues of cultural knowledge; the very nature of a real news report is dependent on an assumed shared culture. This task required students to make connections to the outside world and to life experiences in order to answer the questions of who, what, where, when, why, and how. While completing this task, students needed to use prior knowledge of specific events, occasions, or activities that may or may not be commonplace in their own culture.

This particular sample question was used on the 2010-2011 edition of the OSSLT. The test question asked students to write a news report connecting the headline “Storm Shuts Down Region” to a photograph of a snowy street. In the photograph, barren trees line a snow-covered street. Two people are pictured in the foreground, one of them appearing to clear the snow, another walking. A third person is visible in the background. There appear to be five snow-covered, cars parked along the street. This question was selected since it dealt with an area of knowledge that is almost second nature to students who are in Ontario and have experienced one or more snowstorms. For the participants in this study, the background knowledge required to answer this question with ease was not as easily accessible. I believed that responses to this particular question would allow me to access the perspectives of Chinese ELLs in a way that would thoroughly answer the overarching research questions guiding this study.
Focus group questions. The writing activity was followed by focus group
discussion that employed a semi-structured questioning technique. The focus group
questions (Appendix C) were adapted with permission from those used in a similar
research study by Cheng, Fox, and Zheng (2007; See Appendix E granting permission.)
The questions were field-tested with a group of three ELL university students who had
previously attended the school that would serve as the research site. The volunteers
participating in the field test provided feedback related to the clarity of the questions,
issues of vocabulary, as well as providing me with an estimation of which questions
would generate the most discussion and insight into the overarching research questions
guiding this study. Finally, the field test allowed an estimate of how many questions
could be discussed in an hour-long focus group.

Research Site

Site selection criteria and process. The research site for this study was selected
for multiple reasons. The chief reason this research site was selected was that it satisfied
the criteria required to properly answer the research questions that are guiding this study.
In order to explore the perceptions of Chinese students taking the OSSLT in an overseas
Ontario curriculum school setting, the research site had a number of criteria were met in
addition to certain criteria that would be beneficial, if not mandatory, for the data
collection required for this study. The required aspects of the research site are as follows:
the site had to be in China, be an Ontario-curriculum school, and have sufficient potential
study participants as well as participants whose English proficiency was high enough to
be able to partake in the focus group effectively and to diminish the issue of low-level English proficiency being the chief issue that impeded passing the test task. The secondary criteria the selected research site also satisfied were two factors that were considered beneficial to the study. First, the site was entirely or almost entirely populated by students who spoke Chinese as their first language (as opposed to other overseas Ontario curriculum schools with an extremely international cohort of students). Second, the selected site had students write the OSSLT while completing grade 10 academic English (ENG 2D) as opposed to other schools that often only offered the options of grade 11 and 12 university preparation English curriculum classes (ENG 3U and ENG 4U). This second characteristic meant the participants were more similar in age and educational preparation to those Ontario students who also wrote the OSSLT in 2012.

The research site was a school in which I was previously employed. The students I worked with as participants for the study were different than when I was there as a teacher. Therefore the participants did not view me in any capacity other than that of a (foreign) researcher visiting their school. This was especially important, as “power differentials between the moderator (or sponsor) and the participants can stifle discussion and must be taken into consideration” (Krueger, 1995, p. 529). Because I have never taught any of the students participating in the study, I did not have any preconceived notions regarding how the end results of the news report test question and subsequent focus group would be manifest. This fact limited the potential for personal bias to cloud my interpretation of the data.
Description of the research site. The research site for this study was located in the southeast of China in a developing urban area with a population that has little interaction with non-Chinese residents. The school site itself is in a building shared with a Chinese public school. Students at this research site complete both their Chinese and Ontario diplomas simultaneously. Because students will graduate with a dual-diploma, the class schedule was different than that of either a Chinese public school or an Ontario public school, as was the “school culture”, which can be characterized as hybrid of Chinese and Ontarian influence. Although there were certainly extra-curricular opportunities styled after the school culture in Ontario (student’s council, athletic events, holiday celebrations, and graduation ceremonies), there were not nearly as many clubs, sports, or events available due to the focus on academics. This is because these kinds of “after school” activities require just that: time after school is over. The focus on academics within the Chinese school system meant that students did not finish class mid-afternoon like their peers in Ontario; rather, students at the research site were required to arrive at school an hour before classes began for the morning study period, and were also required to stay after the day’s classes had been completed for the evening study period. Academically, the students complete the same path as other Chinese students until the equivalent of grade nine in Ontario. Once students enter grade 9, they begin two courses taught by Ontario-certified teachers, although these courses do not count toward the OSSD. It is upon successful completion of the grade nine year that students begin to take Ontario-curriculum courses that will count toward the OSSD. The content of grades 10
and 11 are divided almost equally between the requirements of the Chinese diploma and the OSSD. The final year at the school is devoted entirely to Ontario curriculum courses, as the students had completed their Chinese diploma requirements in grade 11.

**Role of the Classroom Teacher**

The teacher for the participating class of ENG 2D was aware of the basic premise of the study. As is required by the school, she is an Ontario-certified teacher. Although the classroom teacher was not directly involved in the data collection, she was present during class time when participants were completing the news report test question, and ensured I was made aware if a participant had a question when completing the test question.

**Participants**

All of the students at the research site were Chinese ELLs. Due to the high tuition required to attend the school, the vast majority of students attending this school were from affluent families, with the exception of a few students who attended the school on scholarship. Because this study examined the role of cultural and background knowledge as related to literacy, this study required students with strong English proficiency. All 26 (16 female and 10 male) students from the highest-ranked grade 10 English class (ENG 2U) were invited to participate in the study. All participants are referred to through a pseudonym in this study in order to protect confidentiality. Although all 26 initially decided to participate, one student withdrew before the study began. After the students
completed the news report test question task, I collected all 25 participants’ writing at the end of the 45-minute period.

I then selected a random sample of 15 students as participants for the 60-minute focus group session. Students selected to participate in the focus groups first grouped alphabetically, and then were adjusted to evenly separate the number of male and female participants in each group. Of the 15 participants involved in the focus group, 10 participants were female, and 5 were male. All participating students were given a letter of information (Appendix F) and those who agreed, signed a form of consent (Appendix G). I explained the study in person and made the participation details very clear to the students so that they were able to decide whether or not to participate. I emphasized that they were free to withdraw from the study at any point, for any reason and without any form of penalty. The letter of information explicitly stated that participation in the second phase of the study did not denote a student’s performance on the news report test question. As only one student withdrew during the study, the quality of the study was not comprised. The high number of students who wanted to participate allowed the study to unfold as originally intended. In a qualitative study such as this, I believe that the number of participants was sufficient to allow for both depth and breadth of data.

Focus Group Descriptions

The participants are profiled in order to add context when reading the results chapter and the discussion chapter. I describe the participants with some individual
characteristics in addition to their behavior in the focus group context. All students’ names are pseudonyms.

**Focus group 1.** The first focus included three female students, Ming, Hong, and Bei, and two male students, Li and Boyi. Li was the most talkative of the group, but did not dominate the conversation. Li would often be the first to respond when I posed a question, and often took the time to clarify his answer if he felt he was not being clearly understood. Ming was just the opposite, being hesitant to contribute. Ming seemed to be less comfortable speaking in English than her counterparts in the focus group, and often felt she did not know how to answer a question. Hong was eager to respond, yet somewhat hesitant about her ability to share in English, which led to her often clarifying her statements. Bei was involved in the focus group. Although she was quiet, her responses were often thoughtful and added to the conversation. Boyi’s participation was the most varied of participants, sometimes not involving himself in the conversation at all, but at other points sharing lengthy and detailed answers. It was clear that, while Boyi may have not been completely at ease at the start of the focus group, he gradually became more comfortable with sharing his opinions. It also appeared that, when Boyi felt particularly strongly about a topic, he was more eager to share. All of the participants responded to questions if asked directly. Although they were certainly not as comfortable with me as they were with their teacher, they seemed at ease once the focus group started.

**Focus group 2.** The second focus group included three female students, Lin, Yayu, and Xiulan, and two male students, Huang and Feng. Unquestionably, Lin was the
leader of the group, volunteering answers and encouraging others to share their opinions. Yayu was also eager to participate, although she was, in her own words, nervous to speak in English. Xiulan participated without prompting. Although she was not the first to share her perspective, she was thoughtful in her responses, often adding to the conversation instead of simply repeating the responses of the other participants. Huang offered an insightful perspective and, similarly to Xiulan, offered responses that often differed from his peers in the focus group. Feng was by far the quietest of the participants, and rarely volunteered an opinion unless prompted. Feng’s shyness seemed to stem from difficulty in not being able to easily communicate in English; compared with the rest of the focus group, his English proficiency was noticeably lower.

**Focus group 3.** The third focus group was the most unevenly split between male and female students. The third focus group had only one male student, Bohai, and four female students, Zhu, Mei, Yuna, and Jing-Wei. Perhaps because he was the only male student, Hua was very quiet throughout the discussion. However, when asked a question, he would respond immediately. Zhu was the most talkative of the group, and injected humour and self-awareness into the discussion. Yuna was excited and eager to participate, but seemed unsure of her response. Mei often echoed answers given earlier by other participants, especially those of Yuna. Jing-Wei was a thoughtful contributor, often answering the question last, but offering clear and insightful answers. Overall, this group had the most to share. This could be a product of going last, or simply the result of a number of outgoing personalities (Krueger, 1995).
Research Questions

This study explored the challenges experienced by Chinese ELLs taking the OSSLT in an overseas Ontario curriculum school context. The guiding research questions were as follows:

1. How do Chinese ELLs taking the OSSLT perceive the tasks required on the OSSLT?
2. How do issues of culturally-embedded knowledge affect test-takers’ ability to take the test successfully?

The research questions focused on the process of engaging with the news report test question rather than the product because the goal of this study was to explore how a specifically provincially-situated large-scale assessment was interpreted by test-takers who were not a part of the specified cultural context. Although I scored the news report test questions in order to provide context for the resulting data of this study, I was intent on identifying the challenges that participants encountered when attempting to make connections and meaning while completing the news report test question. I was also interested in exploring the methods through which participants in this specific educational context were able to use strategies that resulted in a successful completion of the task.

Data Collection Procedures

Role of the researcher. At the research site, I, as the researcher, acted as the facilitator and note-taker for both the writing activity and focus groups. I was also
responsible for the debriefing of the activity, which allowed both the students and teachers to learn from the experience of the news report test question. Although I was unknown to the group of students directly participating in the research, I was familiar with the school environment. I was a teacher at that same school throughout the 2009-2010 school year, thus familiarity with the school’s context and student population provided me with the credibility to conduct this study. However, I was very careful not to present myself in the role of teacher so as to avoid influencing the participants and to avoid creating a hierarchical power dynamic (Krueger, 1995).

**Arrival at the research site.** I arrived at the research site three days in advance of the actual scheduled data collection activities. During this time, I remained in the background in the school and classrooms, assisting teachers and students in a non-invasive way. The purpose of this was to allow participants to familiarize themselves with me for several reasons. This initial familiarization allowed participants to feel more comfortable throughout the data collection process, which I believe encouraged participants to feel that they were in a safe environment. Although the first three days spent at the research site did not appear to be of immediate value, I considered it important to create a level of comfort with the students so that the participants would be comfortable sharing their perspectives. That trust between myself and the participants was evident in both written format during the news report test question and their responses during the focus group session. Additionally, my arrival at the research site in advance of the actual data collection activities permitted students to make an informed
decision regarding their participation in the study. As I did not wish them to feel pressured, I gave them ample time to understand what the study entailed, and encouraged potential participants to share questions they had regarding the study. This resulted in 25 out of 26 students participating. Engaging with the teachers and administrators at the research site was also a goal of my early arrival. Although I had corresponded with teachers and administrators via email prior to my arrival, in-person discussions fostered their comfort level with me in my role as a researcher at their school.

**News report test question.** Participants first completed the writing activity as a class during a 45-minute period. The news report test question and corresponding answer sheet were placed on each student’s desk before their arrival, closely replicating the OSSLT test environment. The desks were organized into individual rows with large spaces separating them, which further replicated the OSSLT testing environment that is used at that school. I began the first news report test question once all the participating students had arrived. I provided participants with very brief instructions, reading verbatim the directions provided by EQAO for the task. Students were given a verbal prompt to begin writing. I provided students with written reminders regarding the remaining time on the chalkboard at 10-minute intervals. The participants’ regular classroom teacher was present for the administration of this phase of the study, but remained a passive observer at the back of the class.

While participants were writing, I noted various categories of student behavior. I documented both the number and kind of questions posed by students (in verbatim
language), the amount of time that had elapsed before the first participant began to write
their news report, the amount of time that had elapsed before the last student began to
write their news report, as well as general notations concerning the average amount of
time it took the majority of the 25 participants to begin the task. Noting the questions
asked by the participants provided information about specific aspects of the news report
test question that remained unclear for some participants even after they read the
instructions provided. Although I informed participants they were permitted to ask
questions during the activity, I explained that I was unable to provide answers for
participants that clarified the test’s instructions, vocabulary, or expectations. My intent
was to mirror the expectations that EQAO required for teachers supervising the official
OSSLT in order to preserve the validity of the news report test question. After the 45-
minute period had passed, I reminded students that they were not to have written their
names on the news report in order to preserve confidentiality. I then collected the news
reports from each student and then dismissed the class.

I scored the news reports’ responses immediately after participants exited the
classroom. The purpose of scoring the news reports immediately was so that I had a
general understanding of the overall experience of the participants, which allowed for
minor, yet meaningful, adjustments to the proposed focus group questions. The news
report responses were scored using both of the EQAO-constructed rubrics of the news
report: one rubric used to score topic development, and another rubric used to score
writing conventions (See Appendix D). Beyond informing the adjustments that I made to
the focus group questions, scoring the news reports also provided supplementary data for this study. I obtained the following information: the number of participants who were successful in satisfying the topic development requirements for the news report and/or passed the requirements for use of conventions, the number of participants who were unsuccessful in meeting the requirements for topic development and/or use of conventions, and the number of participants whose work I scored as being off-topic. I was principally interested in the news report responses that I had scored as off-topic because of issues related to cultural literacy. Reading and analyzing the news reports that were scored as off-topic facilitated answering the questions that guided this study.

**Focus group sessions.** I conducted three focus group sessions over the three-day period immediately following the writing activity. Each focus group included 5 participants. As previously mentioned, focus group participants were organized so male and female participants were divided evenly. The size of the group was selected in order to ensure that I was able to “effectively elicit the breadth of responses” present in a group (Berg, 2009, p.159). Although female participants (10) outnumbered male (5) participants in the second phase of the study, this reflected the demographics of the actual class. The focus group discussions were recorded using two voice recorders and were also captured in an abbreviated hand-written transcript that I kept indicating the order of participants’ comments. The selection of the focus group method was intended to create a “social environment in which group members are stimulated by one another’s perceptions and
ideas”, which enriched the quality of the discussion (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010, p. 363).

As the focus group facilitator, it was my responsibility to begin the discussion. As recommended by Kruger, each focus group began with questions unrelated to the study in order to ease participants into the discussion (1995). After participants appeared at ease interacting with one another, I directed the conversation toward the questions guiding this study. The open-ended nature of the focus group questions was intentional, intended to invite responses that would provide rich responses (Glesne, 2011; MacMillan & Schumacher, 2010). As mentioned earlier in the chapter, the focus group questions were adapted from an earlier study (Zheng et al., 2007). The minimal changes that I made to the focus group questions were made in order to better answer the guiding research questions of this study. All of the adaptations I made to the questions used in Zheng et al.’s study were made with reference to the suggestions found in Glesne (2011) and MacMillan and Schumacher (2010) regarding the importance of adapting questions in a manner that was mindful of the number of participants and the length of the focus group. I also made adaptations based on recommendations from Patton (2002) in order to address the possible challenges of conducting focus group interviews of a cross-cultural nature.

**Debriefing students and teachers.** The debriefing process only involved the news report test question, and took place after the focus group sessions were completed. Due to time constraints, I provided the teacher of the participants with general feedback designed to help participants improve when they do write the OSSLT. Feedback was not
specific to individual participants since the news reports were submitted without participant names. The choice to provide general, class-wide feedback was made in order to maintain confidentiality to the highest degree possible, to reassure participants that their news report results will not in any way influence their grades for the course, and to minimize any possible feelings of exclusion for the student who chose not to participate.

Data Analysis

The observation notes made during the writing activity, the actual recording as well as both the transcripts and artifacts from the focus group sessions, were analyzed in a number of ways to improve the reliability of the study’s results. The use of qualitative coding software Atlas.ti assisted with data analysis. This software was used to code the transcripts both with codes created prior to the focus group sessions, as well as codes that emerged from the focus group sessions. Preservation of the participants’ verbatim language allowed for the study to present an authentic narrative account (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). The data analysis sought commonalities amongst participant verbal responses, observed actions, and written artifacts, but I also looked for discrepant data in order to create a thorough representation of the findings.

Analysis of observation notes. As mentioned above, I took observation notes while participants were writing their news report. These were used to provide simple background information to readers of this study and to add context to the results.

Analysis of news report test questions. Although this study focused on the data collected from the participant responses from the focus groups, data from the news report
test question were scored, coded for themes, and used to made adjustments to the focus group questions. The news report test question and the scoring of the question were intended to “help validate the verbal responses” from the focus groups (Berg, 2009, p. 175). A rubric created by EQAO for the express purpose of scoring the news report test question was used to score the completed news reports (Appendix D).

**Analysis of focus group transcripts.** During the focus group session, participants identified aspects of the news report tasks that were challenging, confusing, interesting, or otherwise noteworthy. The semi-structured questioning technique that was used to direct the discussion allowed me to expand on participant responses by asking follow-up questions (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). The flexibility offered by a semi-structured questioning technique ensured that I was able to acquire the data that would allow me to answer the research questions. This questioning style also permitted participant responses to guide the focus group rather than my own expectations, which helped to diminish any preconceived ideas or biases I may have had going into the focus group phase of the study. The transcripts were coded using Atlas.ti in multiple stages; an initial coding was then re-coded to condense themes that were similar. I began the coding process and came up with a large number of themes. Atlas.ti was used during this phase of the analysis to connect thematic categories together, thus decreasing the number of themes. The initial Atlas.ti coding procedure involved 16 separate themes, and then subsequently, 10 closely connected themes emerged. From these ten themes, I then re-coded the themes by hand. It was through the hand-coding process that I was able to merge the smaller sub-themes
into two larger thematic categories: cultural literacy and language proficiency. I then divided the sub-themes between the two overarching thematic categories, further streamlining the data collection process. Four sub-themes (topic knowledge, test literacy, creativity, and decoding the photograph) connected to the overarching theme of cultural literacy. Two sub-themes (test anxiety and participants’ suggestions) related to the theme of language proficiency.

**Ethical Considerations**

Because my study required the perspective of a very specific group of students, I required ethical clearance that would enable me to conduct a study that would allow me to involve children under 18 years of age and to do so in China, all while satisfying the rigorous requirements of any study conducted with the approval of Queen’s University. Approval was granted for this study by General Research Ethics Board on January 24 2012 (Appendix H). No additional ethical clearance was required by the research site.

**Summary**

My methodological approach was a qualitative multi-phase data collection process that involved observations, written artifacts, scoring of the completed written artifacts (the news report test question), and then focus groups. An analysis of the data consisted of the themes that were gleaned from the focus group transcripts. In addition to enabling triangulation of data, these procedures are what I believe to be a sound combination of data collection methods that were able to provide both depth and breadth of data capable of answering the research questions guiding this study.
Chapter 4
Findings

This chapter presents the findings of this study. The first section of this chapter focuses on the observations that were made while participants carried out the news report test activity. These observations will be used to frame the second section of this chapter: the scored results of the news report. The third part of the chapter will share actual excerpts taken directly from the news reports that participants completed. This section is intended to frame the results of the focus group discussions and improve triangulation. The final section of the chapter engages with the perspectives of the participants. The final section contains specific themes that were suggested by the literature review and themes that emerged from the actual focus groups. As the focus groups are the mechanism through which test-taker perspectives are identified, this section comprises the bulk of this chapter.

Observations

While observing participants as they wrote the test, I made written observations of the following details: the general actions and atmosphere of the classroom, the number of questions that were asked regarding the news report, the kind of questions that were asked about the news report, as well as when participants started and finished their news reports.

Participants entered the classroom with energy, on time, and were aware that they would be participating in something other than the regularly scheduled classroom
activities. Participants sat down quickly, listened to instructions quietly, and seemed to comprehend instructions that were read aloud to them in the same manner that would have occurred in an actual OSSLT test-taking situation. Participants were aware that the entire 45-minute period was allotted for the regular class. After I outlined the basic instructions for the news report (as can be seen in Appendix B), not a single participant began to write. Five minutes passed before a single participant started to write the news report. It was at this point the first of three test-related questions was raised while the test was in progress by a participant, who had a question regarding vocabulary, and asked “what is the meaning of the word relate”. This question was quickly followed by another participant raising his hand to ask what “should the tone of the news report be like”. At this juncture, 10 minutes had passed, and all but three participants had started writing the news report. Some participants ignored the request that they not talk to one another, whispering to one another at 12 minutes into the activity. After three verbal reminders, the classroom was silent. Finally, after 14 minutes had passed, all participants had started writing the news report. A third (and final) question was asked by another participant who wondered where “should the location be”. Every time a participant asked a question, those around the inquiring participant stopped and listened to the question being asked, as well as to the answer I provided. The first participant to complete her news report test question did so after only 25 minutes, with two more participants following at the 30-minute mark. The rest of the participating students continued to write until the end of the 45-minute period. One participant chose not to submit her news report at all, which
I considered to be her method of removing herself from the study. The remaining 25 participants submitted their news reports, allowing them to participate in the second phase of the study should they be selected.

**News Report Test Question Scores**

Twenty-five news reports were completed and scored. Using the rubric and scoring methods provided by EQAO (Appendix D), the news reports were scored into nine possible categories: Blank, Illegible, Off topic, Code 10, Code 20, Code 30, Code 40, Code 50, and Code 60. Of the numerical code scores, a Code 10 represented the low end of the score, and a Code 60 was the highest score. Three participants’ news reports were scored as a code 10. Most participants submitted completed news reports that were scored as a code 20: nine participants’ news reports were scored a 20. The criterion for a code 20 is the most flexible. The code 20 news reports will be discussed more in depth further in this chapter. Four participants scored a code 30. Only six participants were given a passing score of a code 40. No news reports were scored as either codes 50 and 60. Finally, three participants completed news reports that were scored as off topic.

**Code 10 news reports.** News reports completed by participants in this study that were scored as a code 10 fulfilled either of the following criteria:

1) The response is related to the headline and/or photo but is not a news report.

2) The response is a news report related to the headline and/or photo. It identifies an event, but provides no supporting details, or provides details that are unrelated to the event. There is no evidence of organization. (EQAO, 2011)
In practice, the news reports that were scored as a code 10 demonstrated a student’s lack of control over the topic, was disorganized, and often came across as being written by someone with an extremely limited level of English. This level of news report was not difficult to score, and only accounted for three reports, or 12% of the completed news reports scored for this study.

**Code 20 news reports.** News reports that were scored as a code 20 fulfilled either of the following scoring criteria:

1) The response is related to headline and/or photo but only partly in the form of a news report.

2) The response is a news report related to the headline and/or photo, but the focus on an event is unclear and inconsistent. There are insufficient supporting details: too few or repetitious. There is limited evidence of organization.

(EQAO, 2011)

The news reports that were scored as code 20 were probably the most difficult to score. This scoring category contained a wide range of English language proficiency levels, and often held examples of participants who were able to use an extensive vocabulary and those who had a limiting vocabulary. However, due to the nature of the scoring criteria, news reports indicating varying levels of English proficiency were able to be scored as a code 20. It is in this scoring category that issues of cultural literacy, the focus of this study, are most apparent. It is plausible that some participants’ lack of familiarity, with either the topic provided or the test question format, circumvented the
students’ ability to best demonstrate their writing. Many of the news reports scored as a code 20 were written in a highly creative manner, which sometimes did not follow the appropriate news report format. New reports scoring a code 20 were the greatest in number overall, accounting for nine of the completed news reports, or 36% of the news report scored.

**Code 30 news reports.** The news reports that were scored as a code 30 fulfilled the following scoring criteria:

The response is a news report related to the headline and photo with a clear focus on an event. There are insufficient and/or vague supporting details or the connection of the details to the event is not always clear. There is evidence of organization, but lapses distracted from overall communication. (EQAO, 2011)

Within this study, participants scoring a code 30 often wrote more clearly than their code 20 counterparts, but struggled with providing details. In some cases, participants scoring a code 30 did not demonstrate as much variety in vocabulary, but were able to write within the appropriate format (a news report) effectively. The news reports that were scored as a code 30 sometimes demonstrated evidence of issues with cultural literacy, with some reports including paragraphs that departed from the subject of snowstorms. The paragraphs that were unrelated to the intended news report topic may have stemmed from a lack of understanding of the provided topic (snowstorms). Of the scored news reports for this study, those scored as a code 30 represented four or 16% of the total news reports.
**Code 40 news reports.** The news reports scored as a code 40 fulfilled the following criteria:

The response is a news report related to the headline and photo with a clear and consistent focus on an event. There are sufficient supporting details, however, only some are specific. The organization is mechanical and any lapses do not distract from the overall communication (EQAO, 2011).

Although the scoring scheme for the OSSLT news reports went from off topic to a code 60, the highest score reached by the participants in this study was a code 40. Within this study, participants whose news reports were scored as a code 40 demonstrated strong organizational skills, details and descriptors that were specific, and presented their writing within the format of a news report. Participants’ writing that was scored as a code 40 often included a wide range of vocabulary which was used effectively, and demonstrated comfort with the topic provided for the news report. Of the news reports that were submitted, six or 24% were scored as a code 40.

**Off topic news reports.** The news reports that were scored as off topic needed only to fall under the following criteria: “the response is off topic”. Similarly to the news reports that were scored as a code 20, news reports that were scored as off topic often demonstrated issues related to cultural literacy. Some of the news reports submitted did not take the form of a news report; rather, participants used the photograph as inspiration for a creative writing piece. Of the news reports submitted, three or 12% were scored as off topic.
Table 1:

Summary of Participants’ News Report Test Question Scores.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>News Reports (Total = 25)</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Off Topic</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Code 10</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Code 20</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Code 30</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Code 40</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Code 50</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Code 60</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Quotations from News Reports

This section provides a brief selection of verbatim quotations from participants’ news reports that highlight issues that also surfaced within the focus group discussions. Although a number of themes emerged from the written artifacts, only the categories of cultural literacy, test format literacy, and vocabulary are discussed here as they were the most prevalent. Because the completed news reports were submitted anonymously, they have been labeled arbitrarily as I do not know to whom each news report belongs.
Cultural literacy. In a number of instances, it became clear that a participant was very unfamiliar with the topic or unfamiliar with the cultural expectations of a news report about a snowstorm. One of the participants wrote that, “the snow means the new year will have a good harvest. The spring is coming soon” (News Report A). While nothing in this quotation is necessarily wrong, it does not fit with the expectations of a news report. It is not specifically an issue of test format literacy or a problem with vocabulary, yet the quotation above stands out as something that does not work within the parameters of this test question for reasons of language selection, tone, and a weak connection to the headline provided as a part of the news report test question. Another participant wrote that the city of “Los Angeles was destroyed by the storm” (News Report B). While it is not overly problematic that the participant selected Los Angeles as the site of the snowstorm, it does demonstrate a potential unfamiliarity with the topic, given the limited chance of a snowstorm happening in a city located at this latitude. This can be understood as an issue of cultural literacy and not an issue of geographically-related knowledge because of the physical context the participant was writing in; while it may be common knowledge that Los Angeles is not prone to snowstorms for a student who was born and raised in Ontario, that knowledge is far less likely to be known to one of the participants of this study.

Test format literacy. Many of the news reports demonstrate a student’s lack of familiarity with the test format. One such report begins with a participant writing in first person: “I am reporting bad news for you”, likely indicating a television news report
instead of a newspaper article (Participant C). Another example that demonstrated a participant’s lack of experience with this format of test question as they seemed to view the exercise as a creative writing task: “Look! There are some cars wearing new white clothes. Trees and houses were painted with the colour white. What a beautiful white world!” (Participant D).

**Vocabulary.** It is evident throughout many of the news reports that participants struggled with the vocabulary that is used in relation to snowstorms. In attempting to describe how motorists were dealing with the snowstorm, one participant wrote that “some drivers use some machines to clean the floor” (Participant E). By “some machines”, the participant is likely referring to a snow blower or similar device. Another news report describes how the trees were affected by the storm, as “the trees have no hair” (Participant F). The lack of vocabulary this participant had to describe the effects of the storm certainly impeded the inclusion of the main idea of the news report.

**Focus Group Results**

A large number of themes emerged from the focus group discussions. These themes often echoed what was unearthed from the actual news reports; additional insights emerged from the focus groups. Although discrete themes resulted from the discussions, there were two notable threads that connected responses that may, at first, appear unrelated. The theme of cultural literacy permeated many of the thematic categories that participants explored in the focus group discussions. As such, cultural literacy is alluded to in a number of different thematic sub-categories. The sub-themes of test format,
creativity, decoding the photograph, and topic knowledge were all sub-themes in which it became evident that issues of cultural literacy were manifested. A second overarching theme of language proficiency also emerged, containing a number of related sub-themes that surfaced during the focus group discussions. The sub-themes connected to language proficiency included test anxiety, vocabulary, and suggestions for improving the news report test activity. Each is discussed below.

**Cultural literacy**

Cultural literacy, the informal knowledge gained from living within a culture, was an aspect of the test that impeded participants from demonstrating their respective literacy abilities (Hirsch, 1987; Moyer, 2011; Schweizer, 2009). The issue of cultural literacy emerged in a number of different sub-themes, becoming a common thread interwoven in the participants’ responses.

**Topic knowledge.** The OSSLT is intended for an audience of grade 10 students attending an Ontario curriculum school; the vast majority of these students attend school in Ontario, allowing these students a level of informal and experiential knowledge in relation to a topic such as “snowstorms”. Because the participants of this study were attending an Ontario curriculum school in southern China and had never seen snow, they responded to this news report test question without any firsthand knowledge of what a snowstorm was like. A number of participants commented on their lack of personal experience with snow, with one participant saying “[name of city redacted] has no snow” (Boyi, Focus Group 1, line 114). Contemplating the snowstorm image, Zhu wondered on
behalf of his fellow participants “What will happen next? We don’t have ideas” Focus Group 3, line 47). Mei agreed, saying that her cohorts “can’t hardly imagine” snow. Some participants suggested they would prefer writing about a natural disaster with which they were familiar, like a rain storm or earthquake. The participants’ responses highlight how easily a lack of informal cultural knowledge can subvert a test from accurately revealing a student’s ability, thus affecting the interpretation of the question.

Some participants who believed their own knowledge of the topic to be sufficient were, in fact, misinformed. One participant related that the storm likely happened in California, demonstrating a lack of knowledge about where snowstorms would be likely to occur. Another participant related that she would feel “excited and wonderful” at the prospect of a snowstorm (Hong, Focus Group 1, line 122). Participants had a limited ability to describe what would happen in a snowstorm, and seemed limited to describing it in basic terms. Commonly held reactions to the snowstorm were that of being “afraid” or feeling “very cold”.

Participants revealed they were at a disadvantage in comparison to their Ontario-residing counterparts. One participant said that someone writing the news report test question that lived in Ontario “may experience this kind of situation” (Yuna, Focus Group 3, line 216). In the same vein, participants indicated that experiencing a snowstorm would allow them to “know what they should do” (Mei, Focus Group 3, line 215). In contrast to the participants in this study, students residing in Ontario “can clearly know what happens when a storm comes” (Jing-Wei, Focus Group 3, line 217).
A portion of the foci group commentary also emphasized the differences in daily life that an Ontario-residing student experience in comparison to a participant living in southern China in this study. Three participants (Li, Zhu, and Yuna) focused on the Chinese government’s role in relation to managing a natural disaster like a snowstorm. Although the participants were able to answer the question posed by the news report test question, the focus group discussions demonstrate that quality and clarity of the answers provided may have been limited by a lack of informal cultural knowledge about snowstorms.

**Test literacy.** A widely cited cause for a portion of the issues ELLs experience in relation to testing is the lack of familiarity a student may have with a culture’s testing formats (Abedi, 2004; Usman, 2009). Many of the observations shared by participants during this study supported this theory. Although a range of abilities were illustrated by the answers participants submitted as their news reports, many of the participants verbalized a lack of experience with this kind of test format.

One participant, Mei, perceived the experience of writing the test as “special or unique”, explaining that it was “because it’s the first time to do such a newspaper report” (Mei, Focus Group 3, line 68). Mei further related that the uniqueness of the activity was also related to the topic of the test task, saying “it’s the first time to do such a newspaper report, and it’s about snow” (line 71). The notion that the news report was exciting was repeated by Hua, who commented that the experience of writing the news report was “exciting because it’s the first time to do it”. When relating their perceptions of this type
of test task, both Hua and Mei were noticeably excited about the news report. Both participants said that although they were inexperienced with this kind of test question, it was an exciting way to demonstrate their English language literacy.

Other participants also mentioned that writing this kind of test question was a new experience, but did not feel that this was a positive aspect of the OSSLT. Li remarked that he “did not know what to write about. No ideas” (Li, Focus Group 1, lines 101-102). Lin said that the activity was “challenging”, because “this is the first time I write the English news report” (Focus Group 2, line 74). Yayu was ill at ease completing the task because she was unsure of how to best answer this kind of question, noting that “It was my first time to write a news report” (Focus Group 2, line 78). Similarly, Bei was unsure of how to create a news report, so she decided to tell “a story about the picture” in lieu of writing a news report (Focus Group 1, line 141). Immediately after Bei shared her lack of comprehension regarding the test question format, Ming said that he too “thought the same as [Bei]” and decided to write a story that was inspired by the photo that accompanied the news report (Focus Group 1, line 142). It was apparent that Ming was relieved that someone else was also unsure of how to properly write a news report; the relief that someone else experienced the same confusion was evident in Ming’s facial expressions, body language, and in his shared thoughts during the focus group session. This prompted Boyi to express his frustrations with being asked to write a news report. After Ming and Bei shared their experience with the news report, Boyi stated:
We do not do a lot with newspapers, so we don't know how to write like this. We don't know who, what, where, when, why, how. I just know that I am supposed to write something about a snowstorm. (Focus Group 1, lines 148-150)

Interestingly, Boyi emphasized the experiences, knowledge, and abilities of the class as a collective; he did not express his frustration on an individual level, as was the case with Bei and Ming; rather, Boyi commented on a mutual lack of preparation for all of the participants. Boyi expanded his response, stating that this type of test was not common in his Chinese classes. When asked if a teacher would have used this kind of test question format, Boyi believed that it would be used “just as practice”, and not as a real measure of literacy (line 206). In another focus group, Huang expressed similar thoughts concerning the difficulties connected to the lack of preparation related to writing a news report. Huang was uncertain regarding how to incorporate “a lot of things. How, what, and where, and when” (Focus Group 2, lines 82-83).

In addition to a lack of experience writing a news report, there was also emphasis on the limited exposure to English news articles, with one participant noting that “it is so difficult to buy the English newspaper” (Xiulan, Focus Group 2, line 24). Mei indicated that she had limited exposure to English newspapers, noting that she had read an English newspaper “just one time” (Focus Group 3, line 25). Yuna quickly agreed with Mei’s observation, stating she had also read an English newspaper only once (Focus Group 3, line 26). Ming said that while he had an understanding of Chinese newspapers, he did not “know about foreign newspapers” (Focus Group 1, line 134). Although the participants
stated the cost of an English newspaper was not prohibitive for them, reading an English newspaper was simply not something thought to be an important aspect of learning English. While the participants had conflicting perceptions of the news report, some participants viewed this particular OSSLT task as something unfamiliar. Whether participants viewed this unfamiliar task as exciting or challenging, these opposite perceptions are not in conflict: the participants’ responses highlighted the inexperience that this population of students has writing news reports.

**Creativity.** A unique result of this study was the connection many participants made with the news report test question and the concept of creativity. Unlike many native speakers of English who perceive the OSSLT news report test question as a simple, somewhat mechanical task (Fox & Cheng, 2007), the participants in this study shared a very different perspective of the news report test question. Most of the participants in this study reported the news report to be a very creative task. Although a small proportion of participants said that the task was “boring” or “cold”, the most prevalent adjective used to describe the test was “creative”. Additionally, participants also described the news report as “unique” or “special”.

One of the participants, Huang, said that, “English tests are more creative”. Another student, Xiulan, added her experience writing the news report to Huang’s experience with tests in her Chinese classes; Xiulan stated that “Chinese exams are more detailed”, noting also that these exams were concerned with “mostly facts”. The news report afforded participants the opportunity “imagine widely” (Zhu) or to “imagine” and
“make up [a] story…something that is not showing on the picture (Mei). One of the students even saw the news report test question as something requiring him to engage in role play: Boyi’s strategy was to imagine he was “a writer: a reporter”. Lin, who admitted she found the newspaper writing task challenging, used creativity as a strategy to write about a topic she was unfamiliar with. Lin thought she “should be creative to think about what they are doing” in the photograph so that she could write an appropriate answer for the news report activity. Mei believed that she should have relied more on her creativity to improve her writing. After further reflection on the experience of writing the news report, Mei contended that she could have written “more about the situation, more details with [her] imagination” (Focus Group 3, line 254).

Many of the participants’ perceptions of the news report test question as a creative endeavour was in direct contrast to the opinions of many English as a first language speakers; Fox and Cheng (2007) found that this group of students was far more likely to describe the test using the adjective “boring”. Although most participants said that the directions were clear, they may have been interpreting these directions through their own cultural knowledge and experience.

Decoding the photograph. The photograph selected to accompany the news report was a topic within each focus group discussion that generated a considerable amount of discussion. The quality of the photograph was an issue for some participants, with one participant commenting that he wished [the researcher] could “make the picture clear” (Feng, Focus Group 2, line 175). The focus on the clarity of the image was
something that other participants also noticed. When attempting to decode the image, Lin stated that “the picture is not clearly, some people, I don't know [sic] they are doing”; Lin’s inability to decipher what the image was intended to convey is, I believe, connected to issues of cultural literacy (Focus Group 2, line 90). This sentiment was almost a verbatim echo of another participant’s reaction to the image. Boyi said that the image was “not so clear” (Focus Group 1, line 69). After thinking about the image for a few moments, Boyi added that “it[was] hard for me to see it” (Focus Group 1, line 69). The overwhelming consensus, of all three focus groups, was that the image provided was not necessarily beneficial; it lacked both clarity and familiarity.

**Language Proficiency**

Issues connected to a participant’s level of English language proficiency, whether real or perceived, contributed to a number of sub-themes. The increased test anxiety that researchers have demonstrated as common for test-takers writing in a second language was certainly something that these participants mentioned. Similarly, the suggestions participants volunteered in relation to improving the news report test question were almost entirely related to language proficiency.

**Test anxiety.** The majority of participants’ commentary echoed the results of multiple studies (Doe et al., 2007; Fox & Cheng, 2007) demonstrating that being tested in a second language is perceived to be more stressful from the point of view of the test-taker. Although a variety of words were used to describe how participants perceived the experience of taking the OSSLT, the most common word used by participants was
“nervous”. The theme of test anxiety was found throughout many of the major emerging thematic categories; participants were anxious about the test because their overall language proficiency was not perceived as adequate, because of issues of cultural literacy, and also because of a lack of familiarity with the OSSLT format. However, the connection between test anxiety and a deficit in vocabulary or English language proficiency, whether real or perceived, was by far the most common link. One participant, Jing-Wei, connected her anxiety to her lack of mastery of English vocabulary, stating that “my vocabulary is very poor, so I worry” (Focus Group 3, line 164). When discussing how to answer the news report test question, another participant remarked, “I do not have many vocabularies to describe it” (Li, Focus Group 1, line 80). Another shared sentiment by many was that the test was only anxiety-inducing because the test was in English. When participants were asked the reason for their nervousness, the answer was “English”. When participants were asked how they would view the news report test question if it were in Mandarin, the most common word used to describe the participants’ perception was “easy”. The connection between test anxiety and a participant’s perceived language ability was certainly a common issue that was prominent in each of the three separate focus groups.

**Participants’ suggestions.** While the participants in this study shared both positive and negative aspects of writing the news report section of the OSSLT, participants invariably had thoughts regarding how to improve the OSSLT to best allow participants to demonstrate their literacy. Recommendations from participants were often
echoed in other focus groups. The suggestions offered by participants shared the goal of helping participants to answer test questions in a manner that accurately reflected their knowledge and ability. For this reason, the suggestions provided were linked to issues vocabulary, potential accommodations, the photograph, and the topic of the news report. A popular suggestion from participants was for them to be allowed the use of either a dictionary or glossary, something that they were often permitted to use in class.

Many participants, regardless of actual ability, cited issues with English vocabulary as an impediment to the news report section of the OSSLT. For some participants, difficulty in understanding one word had the potential to misdirect the answer provided for the news report. Some participants had vocabulary and English ability that were lower than the other participants. Other participants were not challenged by the vocabulary. One of the participants struggled with finding the correct words to describe the photograph that accompanied the task, stating he did not “have many vocabularies to describe it” (Li, Focus Group 1, line 80). This was likely something beyond a straight-forward issue of middling language proficiency: it is unlikely that someone living in a warm climate who does not experience snowstorms would have had much exposure to the expressions, adjectives, or colloquialisms that would be common linguistic currency in a place, like any town or city in Ontario where snowstorms are something experienced regularly. This issue becomes more complex: not only is this a simple issue of language proficiency, but also it is a symptom of difficulties related to cultural literacy. This issue was also expressed by another participant, who remarked that
“when [he] got this picture, [he] didn't know how to describe” what was happening (Bei, Focus Group 2, line 189).

Another suggestion was that, “some difficult words [should be] changed to easier words” (Yayu, Focus Group 2, line 97). Interestingly, reducing linguistic complexity is accommodation advocated for by a number studies (Abedi, 2008; Rivera & Collum, 2004) that are intended to find ways of improving both the reliability and validity of testing for ELLs. Other participants wished that the OSSLT provided key word definitions, which is a familiar tool that many ELLs encounter (Lin, Focus Group 2, line 98; Yayu, Focus Group 2, line 172). A deficit in English vocabulary was something some participants worried about before writing the news report test question, with Jing-Wei acknowledging that his “vocabulary is very poor” (Focus Group 3, line 164).

Whether or not participants had limited English language proficiency, what was clear was that many participants perceived themselves to be at a disadvantage being tested in English which is their second, or possibly third or fourth, language. Legitimate issues related to vocabulary surfaced in a variety of ways: from simply having a vocabulary that was limited to having a vocabulary that was limited in relation to the topic.

**Summary**

The themes that are present in the observations, in the actual news report artifacts, and the focus groups are generally consistent. The largest overarching themes, cultural literacy and language proficiency, permeate a number of sub-themes. Within the major
themes of cultural literacy and language proficiency, a large amount of collected data
cross referenced themes, suggesting that these two larger themes are closely related. The
connections between these themes are teased out in greater detail in the following and
final chapter.

The participants did demonstrate somewhat anxious behaviour during the mock-
test. But it was only through the focus groups that the actual level of anxiety emerged.
The kinds of questions asked by participants were also foreshadowing of the issues that
emerged within both the news reports and in the ensuing focus group discussions.
The news report test question illustrated a number of different issues: cultural literacy,
test format literacy, and general issues of language proficiency. The focus group findings
further built on what was noted through observations and through artifact analysis. Sub-
themes emerged, indicating some of the subtle ways in which issues of cultural literacy
and/or language proficiency could manifest.

Overall, the findings support what researchers have revealed in previous studies
while also adding a nuanced understanding of how these themes would emerge in a
population as specific as one comprised solely of Chinese ELLs in an overseas Ontario
curriculum school. Unique findings, such as how certain test formats are interpreted
differently depending on one’s cultural background, were also explored. The next chapter
explores the importance of the overlap between themes as well as documenting the
implications of the findings.
Chapter 5

Discussion

The purpose of this study is to explore the challenges experienced by Chinese ELLs taking the OSSLT in the context of a Chinese school using the Ontario curriculum. The guiding research questions are as follows:

1. How do Chinese ELLs taking the OSSLT perceive the tasks required on the OSSLT?
2. How do issues of culturally embedded knowledge affect their ability to take the test successfully?

This chapter includes the implications of the results from all three phases of the study. The chapter begins with describing participants’ actions and questions while writing the news report test question. Subsequently, I report on the results of the analysis and scoring of the completed news report test question. I focus the discussion on how issues of cultural literacy impacted scoring, as well as the difficulties that arose when applying the EQAO-created rubric to an ELL’s work. The chapter then documents the implications of the focus groups and highlights a number of themes touched upon in chapter four, beginning with a discussion of the omnipresent issue of cultural literacy. Although the results of the focus group that emerged cover a variety of themes and sub-themes, the theme of cultural literacy permeated almost every thematic discussion point that the participants highlighted during each focus group. For that reason, I contend that
a focus on cultural literacy infuses the discussion of the themes that emerged: challenges surrounding the test format, participant test preparation, perceptions of the news report test question, and learning opportunities. Implications and limitations of this study are then touched on, centering on both the problematic areas of the study as well as the steps taken to mitigate the limitations when at all possible.

**Questioning and Uncertainty: Answering the News Report Question**

The role of observation was never intended to act as a major source of data collection. Yet this method of data collection was still helpful in providing both the context to the study and additional insights that assisted in answering both of the research questions. In particular, by using Goodall’s (2000) suggested areas of observation (verbal exchanges, practices, and connections) two areas emerged from observing the participants while they completed the news report test question: one, observations regarding how participants interacted with and answered the test question and two, the questions participants asked about the test question.

The majority of participants spent a considerable length of time reading and re-reading a very short test question (considering that the final writing requirement was less than 100 words). The first participant did not begin writing a response until five minutes after they had been given permission to begin. As the participants in this class were from the highest-ranking grade 10 academic English class in the school, the vast majority of the participants were described by their teacher as being at least moderately proficient in English. The length of time it took participants to begin answering the test question and
the observations made about participant behaviour supports Usman’s (2009) finding regarding an added layer of complexity when a test is being taken in a second language. It also confirms research that states the OSSLT test tasks, for example, the newspaper article test question, are viewed as more unfamiliar to ELLs when compared with the rest of the student population (Doe et al., 2011). As was suggested in the results of Doe et al.’s study, ELLs view the OSSLT as having very little in common with the types of instructional activities that are a part of in-class learning. Because of the very dissimilar styles of in-class learning and large-scale assessments Chinese students encounter within the Chinese education system, it is not surprising that large-scale assessments that include a wide variety of question formats like the OSSLT are viewed as unusual (Wang & Byram, 2011; Zhou & Fan, 2007).

The actual questions asked by participants were few in quantity, yet seemed to captivate the attention of the entire group of students taking the test. As was outlined in chapter four, participants only asked three questions: 1) what is the meaning of the word ‘relate’, 2) what should the tone of the news report be like, and 3) where should the location be. To me, these questions highlighted two areas of importance: the culture of assessment in China, and the participants’ need to figure out what the test question was seeking. First, while there were not a large number of questions from participants, the behaviour of the entire group seemed to imply that the lack of questions was not a reflection of participants feeling confident or understanding the intent of the test question. Rather, it seemed that the lack of questions reflected more about the cultural aspect of
education in China (Zhou & Fan, 2007). Although only three questions were asked, the entire room of participants focused entirely on each question’s content how the question was being answered. It seemed evident that, while participants were not overly vocal, it was more a result of participants’ hesitation to clarify any uncertainty. The second important aspect that was underscored by the kind of questions asked by participants is related to the actual content of the question: the focus of two of the questions was not about clarifying the instructions, but was related to interpreting what form the product of the test question should take. These two questions in particular seemed to hold the focus of the participants within hearing range. Both of these observations support Hirsch’s understanding of the importance of cultural literacy in relation to assessment. The participants’ focus on understanding what the question was truly asking them to do supports Hirsch’s research that "cultural literacy is that knowledge which enables a writer or reader to know what other writers and readers know within the literate culture" (1981, p. 8). This is exactly the issue that the participants seemed to have with the test: they were at a disadvantage due to a lack of cultural commonality, and they were struggling to understand what they were required to produce. The remaining question focused on vocabulary, something that was only surprising in that it was the only vocabulary-related question. In spite of the fact that only one participant asked a vocabulary-related question, the other data collection methods used in this study (analysis of the written artifacts and focus groups) highlighted issues with vocabulary as one of the major areas
of difficulty for many of the participants, confirming the findings of prior studies (Doe et al., 2011). The issue of vocabulary is discussed further in this chapter.

**The Validity and Reliability of Scoring**

One of the most telling findings that emerged from the analysis and scoring of the news report test questions was the number of test questions that were scored in the 20, 30, or off-topic range, as can be seen in Table 1 in chapter four. The validity and reliability of the scoring of large-scale assessments for ELLs is important as such scores are often used to determine whether or not students’ education-related needs are being met, as well as to indicate a student’s true level of knowledge or skill (Nagy, 2000). Therefore, the accuracy of such test scores (scoring) is extremely important. As discussed in the literature review earlier in this study, the levels of validity and reliability of an assessment result for an ELL are not always accurate; this is problematic in that educators, policy makers, and even colleges and universities may be using an inaccurate test score to determine what the general student population’s needs are, as well as the individual skill or knowledge level of a particular student. As stated in chapter four, it was through those news report test questions that were scored in the off-topic, 20 and 30 categories (which included a total of 16 or 64% of the news reports) that most explicitly demonstrated how culturally embedded was knowledge (in this case knowledge or experiences relating to snowstorms). That knowledge was required to write a news report that might have scored in the 50 or 60 categories, scores that would allow a test-taker to pass this question of the OSSLT. One of the most noticeable patterns in the writing that
was characteristic of the participants whose reports were scored as meeting the criteria outlined by EQAO for category 20 was the lack of familiarity with the format and tone that are required for a news paper article. This adds to the research concerned with test format; the findings of this study confirm an unfamiliar method of assessment can cause difficulty when interpreting a level of skill or ability, thus threatening the validity of the test score interpretation (Fairbairn & Fox, 2009; Leung & Lewkowicz, 2008; Usman, 2009). While the writing presented by many participants whose news reports were mostly error-free in relation to grammar and spelling, difficulty with the structure, tone, and content was evident. Especially in relation to the written responses, it became evident that a lack of familiarity with the subject suggested that large-scale assessment was not as reliable and valid as indicators of true skill level as it would be for a student writing a test in her/his first language (Abedi, 2004; Abedi et al., 2003).

**Test-Taker Perspectives**

Because the intent of this study is to understand the OSSLT from the perspective of the test-taker, I believe that the focus groups provided the most relevant and topical source of data. The findings from the previous phases of the study that yielded data for analysis, observing the participants in the test environment and analyzing the written artifacts, were mostly important for the triangulation of the data collected in the focus group phase of the study. This discussion section is oriented around the themes that emerged in the results. The implications of the findings concerned with test literacy, topic knowledge, test anxiety, language proficiency, and vocabulary are all discussed.
However, the theme of cultural literacy is discussed as an aspect of all of these interrelated themes because of its importance throughout many of the sub-themes that emerged in the data.

**The Permeation of Cultural Literacy**

The centre around which the results of this study are focused is cultural literacy. At first glance, there seemed to emerge a large number of distinct themes. As chapter four indicates, while the issue of cultural literacy was not the only thematic finding, it was hinted at within each of the themes that emerged. Upon closer examination, the theme of cultural literacy was found to tint the findings and discussion of the majority of the themes that emerged. Because “cultural literacy is a process of participating fully and actively in society, a product of home and schooling, and above all of living in society” (Tchudi, 1988, p.74), it is not surprising that the participants in this study struggled with the cultural literacy of a culture different from their own. Although I vacillated about using cultural literacy as a unifying concept with which to analyze and discuss the findings, the importance of cultural literacy in connection with the other themes, such as test format, topic knowledge, and decoding the photograph on the news report test question in particular, could not be ignored; cultural literacy was the common thread that wove together the majority of themes. Seeing cultural literacy as the connective thread between themes supports the concept of cultural literacy being a subject “which could perhaps integrate, rather than fragment, the curriculum” (Moyer, 2011, p.41). How could I not discuss cultural literacy when discussing the problematic nature of the news report’s
topic: a snowstorm? How could I avoid the underlying issue of culturally embedded knowledge in a photograph depicting a snowstorm to this study’s participants who had never seen or experienced an actual snowstorm? The complexity of the discussion of the issue of cultural literacy stemmed from the nature of cultural literacy itself: because it is so ubiquitous, cultural literacy surfaced simultaneously with other issues. When discussing the issue of decoding the photograph, cultural literacy was a factor, but not the only factor. There is not a substantial amount of literature that focuses on cultural literacy within the context of large-scale assessment, so the analysis and discussion of the issue of cultural literacy seem to be discussed alongside other topics like test anxiety for ELLs or the difficulty some ELLs face when writing a test in an unfamiliar format. While I am not contending that cultural literacy is the only factor impeding an ELL’s success on a large-scale assessment, the results of this study support the conclusions reached by Moyer (2011) and Hirsch (1987) in making a case for a student’s lack of cultural literacy being a serious hindrance. Educators need to consider the effect of cultural literacy in the increasingly globalized education system here in Ontario, and the potential reach of Ontario’s curriculum and education policies outside the province and country.

Test literacy. As the results and analysis in chapter four demonstrate, a number of items are worthy of discussion that related to the format and content of the test question. Participants who perceived the novelty of the newspaper article test question in a positive light mentioned perceiving the test as “special or unique” and being excited to write a news report for the first time (Mei, Focus Group 3, line 81). Other participants
indicated that the fact that the format of the test question was new to them was negative, deeming the task “challenging” or commenting that they were confused and frustrated because he or she did not know how to answer the question (Lin, Focus Group 2, line 70). The results from the focus group demonstrate that even with a study utilizing a very specific group of ELLs, Chinese ELLs being educated at an Ontario curriculum school overseas, a substantial range of perceptions exist regarding the test: useful vs. not useful; boring vs. exciting; and fair vs. unfair. However, while participants may disagree concerning the aforementioned adjectives to describe the test, there was a striking commonality: the format of the test questions as well as the content (winter storm) was not something with which the participants were familiar. The literature emphasized the difficulties that one can encounter when learning and being tested in a second language. Existing research described the problematic nature of testing students in a format they are unfamiliar with; cues that work for students familiar with a certain format of test question, i.e., the length of a test question’s answer being implied by a certain amount of space, do not work for students who do not have the same inherent understanding of a test’s format (Fox & Cheng, 2007; Miller, 1994). This connects to the findings from the work of Fairbairn and Fox (2009) that recommends assisting ELLs through the use of extra preparation for large-scale assessments. The findings of this study certainly support the suggestions of Fox and Cheng (2007) and Miller (1994), who noted the effect that cuing information that is contained in a test’s design can have. Extra preparation that consists of familiarizing ELLs with the kinds of questions they will encounter on an
assessment, and, more importantly, the clues that can help a test-taker decipher the expectations a certain format of test question includes would be extremely helpful. Additionally, the benefits of being fluent in another language (Clark & Flores, 2008) also include drawbacks for ELLs as these learners are constantly trying to manage their newfound knowledge and skills with their “previous learning orientation, and knowledge base” (Usman, 2009, p. 162). Chan (2007) also supported these findings; students often feel caught between two worlds, both culturally and linguistically, when trying to navigate learning in a second language. Although strong proficiency in a learner’s first language is cited as something that helps ELLs learn a second language, “the mere existence of a first-language (regardless of whether it is only oral, or oral and literate) renders the second-language reading process considerably different from the first-language reading process because of the nature of information stored in memory (Bernhardt, 2003, p.112).

The findings of this study certainly confirm the existing research, yet they also add to it. Although the aforementioned studies hint at the complexity of the relationship between and ELL’s knowledge and testing, the focus has tended to be on issues of language load and language proficiency. A few studies look at the connection between test format, cultural literacy, and the experiences of ELLs when writing a test such as the OSSLT (Doe et al., 2011, Fox & Cheng, 2007). The issue is even more complex when the education background of the participants is taken into account; these participants are working within a cultural framework that places heavy importance on avoiding mistakes.
and an educational framework that emphasizes learning through continued practice (Wang & Byram, 2011).

**Subject knowledge.** The difficulties that participants had with the format of the test question were undoubtedly made more severe when combined with a subject that they had extremely limited experience with. Participants were now trying to make sense of an unfamiliar test question format and a subject about which the participants had no direct knowledge of, all while writing in a second language.

As was evident from the findings shared in chapter four, the unknown nature of subject that served as the topic of the news report was perceived by the participants in a number of ways. During the focus group discussions, participants noted that they had difficulty with the following subject-related issues: uncertainty of what actually happens in a snowstorm, uncertainty about the appropriate reaction to a snowstorm, difficulty interpreting what was happening in the accompanying photograph, as well as lacking a snowstorm-related vocabulary. The latter two subject-related difficulties prompted enough discussion to warrant separate thematic categories, and are addressed later in this chapter.

Participants were at a loss when asked to discuss the specific details of a snowstorm. Although participants had a basic understanding of the elements involved (the temperature must be cold, and cars would have difficulty moving), the processes that businesses, local governments, and schools would have in place for a snowstorm were, with good reason, unknown. In terms of affecting the reliability and validity of the test’s
results, research indicates that when students are being tested on a topic that requires engagement with unfamiliar topics, the reliability and validity of the results are compromised (Fairbairn & Fox, 2009). The findings from the written artifact analysis and the focus group discussions alike confirm the problematic nature of having a student write a large-scale assessment outside of the context for which it was originally intended (Sebatane, 2000). It would be interesting to see how the same group of participants would have fared with an identical question format, but using a similar topic that was appropriate to the local context (perhaps an earthquake or rainstorm). Similarly, during the focus group discussion, participants related their uncertainty regarding how to react. Some participants were so enthralled with the idea of experiencing a snowstorm that they saw the event as something that they could enjoy and feel excitement about. Other participants were terrified and perceived it to be a very serious event. Those participants who were excited by the prospect of a snowstorm and those who were not worried about experiencing a snowstorm may have perceived the event differently. Yet both sides shared a feeling of uncertainty that their reaction was appropriate. This type of informal knowledge is a fitting example of Hirsch’s understanding of the importance of cultural literacy (1988). It is unlikely that the Ontario curriculum would extend to cover something as routine as how to react to a snowstorm; rather, it is the kind of knowledge that is simply a part of living within a certain cultural context. Hirsch’s definition and research surrounding cultural literacy has existed for well over 30 years, yet its role in recognizing the impact of a lack of cultural knowledge has not diminished over time. In
an increasingly globalized world, and especially with respect to education, Hirsch’s understanding of the pivotal role cultural literacy has for success on many levels, large-scale assessments like the OSSLT included, only seems to increase. If educators wish to use the results of a large-scale assessment like the OSSLT as an indicator of literacy, the results from this study confirm existing research that emphasizes the importance of acknowledging that local perspectives must be taken into account (Clark & Flores, 2008; Sebatane, 2000). In the 2008 study by Clark and Flores, the researchers concluded that educators have the duty to assess the long-range effects of their teaching practices. Educators and those who have the potential to affect education-related decisions must be aware of the important role they can have in lives of many ELLs; therefore, “teachers must be aware of the ways language, culture, and ethnicity mediate the social construction of their students’ identity” (2008, p. 12). Discounting local perspectives, according to Clark and Flores, is a method guaranteed to negatively affect ELLs as it invalidates their sense of self. This is certainly a concern when it comes to large-scale assessments like the OSSLT. This was evident in the responses participants made regarding fairness. There is a connection between Clark and Flores’ research and the problematic nature of the subject of the news report test question for test-takers who are not a part of the dominant culture. Many participants noted that responding to the news report test question would have been easier for Ontario-based students (Focus group 2, Focus Group 3). The conclusions of Sebatane’s study emphasized the concerns of using large-scale assessments designed for one location and cultural context elsewhere.
Sebatane states that while educators should not avoid assessments from other parts of the world, educators should avoid “‘blind’ and indiscriminate borrowing of assessment systems” (2000, p. 413). Using the OSSLT in an overseas Ontario-curriculum school may not be characterized as harshly as a ‘blind’ decision. However, it is worth questioning the validity and reliability of an assessment that was designed for a specific testing context. Noting that although “knowledge is universal, its application is local” (p. 413), the conclusions reached by Sebatane assist in understanding some of the difficulties that the seemingly proficient-in-English participants of this study encountered when attempting to respond to the news report test question (p. 413). Dismissing an answer provided by a test-taker for reasons of having a different ‘local perspective’ is a kin to privileging certain cultural experiences and norms over others, which is something that many educators strive to avoid.

**Impediments to decoding the photograph.** Participants were very interested in discussing the photograph that accompanied the news report test question. The participants focused their discussion on the perceived lack of clarity of the photograph, the difficulty of interpreting the events and/or the actions depicted in the photograph and, once again, the problematic nature of trying to describe something without the appropriate vocabulary. This is another facet of cultural literacy; without the appropriate background knowledge, the participants were unable to use the photograph in the manner in which the question was designed for it to be used (Hirsch, 1988). The comments made by participants during the focus group confirmed the importance of having a command of
background knowledge related to the photograph. While it was Lin who related that “the picture is not clearly, some people, I don't know to see they are doing”, many participants said that the photograph was not something that was straightforward and easy to understand (Focus Group 2, line 90). It is the immediate understanding of this type of knowledge that allows a photograph to communicate more information to some learners, i.e., culturally literate learners, and less information to other learners, i.e., those who are proficient in the dominant culture’s informal knowledge.

**Vocabulary.** The topic of vocabulary was woven throughout each phase of this study; the questions participants posed while writing the test, the lack of subject-appropriate adjectives, nouns, and verbs used in the news reports, and the participants’ own admitted difficulties that were shared during the focus group discussions all were associated with vocabulary. The results of this study support research that emphasizes the importance of vocabulary for ELLs (Abedi, 2005; 2008). Additionally, the findings outlined in chapter four confirm the negative effect language load can have on the validity and reliability of a large-scale assessment (Abedi et al., Leung & Lewkowicz, 2008; Zheng et al., 2007). Because the importance of vocabulary permeated every phase of this study, the research-supported suggestion of allowing ELLs to use dictionaries or glossaries is something that would have improved both the actual scores of participants as well as the perceived scores that the participants had after completing the news report test question (Abedi et al., 2008). This study also echoed the findings of another study (Fox &
Cheng, 2007) that found that students felt that misunderstanding even one word had the capability of derailing an entire written answer.

**Learning opportunities.** One of the only findings of this study that seemingly contradicts previous research relates to participants’ perspective of the OSSLT. Other studies concerned with student perspectives of the OSSLT have found that ELLs perceive the test in mostly negative terms: participants used the words “bored” to describe the experience (Zheng et al., 2007, p. 81). Of the participants, three specifically mentioned that they found the activity boring, yet a larger number (seven) participants described the news report test question using positive adjectives. “[I]nteresting”, “creative”, “special and unique” were used by multiple participants to describe the task (Xiulan, Focus Group 2, line 85; Lin, Focus Group 2, line 95; Mei, Focus Group 3, line 81).

**Test anxiety.** The findings of this study support the others’ conclusions that state that test anxiety is higher for students writing in a second language (Doe et al., 2007; Fox & Cheng, 2007). The findings of this study connect test anxiety to more than language proficiency issues, and note that the participants were, as mentioned earlier in this chapter, managing an unfamiliar test format and an unfamiliar question topic in addition to writing in a second language. The combination of the language load, test format, and the barrier of cultural literacy created test anxiety for the majority of participants. Reducing test anxiety is not as simple as improving an ELL’s language proficiency. Rather, the results of this study suggest that it is the layered, interconnected nature of the testing process that causes test-related anxiety.
Participant perspective on possible accommodations/changes. Research from several studies (Abedi, 2009; Abedi et al., 2000; 2005; Fairbairn & Fox, 2009; Rivera & Collum, 2004) supports the use of certain accommodations as a mechanism to improve the reliability and validity of large-scale assessments. An interesting aspect of this study was the unearthing of what types of accommodations were viewed as helpful from the perspective of the test-taker. Interestingly, the suggestions from participants overlapped with many of the suggestions from researchers. Although of the 75 documented accommodations (Appendix A) used and supported in the United States, only 11 of these have been found to support ELLs (Abedi, 2009). All of the suggestions from participants in this study were similar to the 11 research-supported accommodations (Appendix I). Participants made overt suggestions that were related to process issues. The most popular requests from participants were for key words, glossaries, and reducing the language load of the questions (although the participant simply referred to reducing the language load having “some difficult words changed to easier words” (Yayu, Focus Group 2, line 97). Reducing the language load and providing key words are issues that relate to the process of writing the test. While I am not suggesting that the world of academia abandon research related to accommodations, it is worth noting that ELLs seem to have a grasp of how they can best be supported. The findings of this study suggest that future research into the area of test-taker perspectives may provide even greater insight into how to best support the needs of ELL test-takers.
Chapter 6

Conclusions

I begin my final chapter by directly addressing how my study answers the overarching research questions that guided this study. I then discuss the implications that resulted from the conclusions of my research, both educational and theoretical. Chapter six is concluded with my closing thoughts regarding the study.

Addressing the Research Questions

The first question guiding my study asked: How do Chinese ELLs taking the OSSLT perceive the tasks required on the OSSLT? By combining elements of the themes that emerged through the focus groups specifically, as this was the phase of the study that engaged directly with test-taker perspectives, an understanding of how Chinese ELLs perceive the tasks required on the OSSLT unfolded. Discussion about the news report test question elicited a number of opinions from the participants. However, within this diversity of opinion, a uniform thread emerged uniting the perceptions of those students participating in the study: they all perceived the test question in a very different light than most of the Ontario-born students who speak English as their first language (Fox & Cheng, 2007). It is in seeking the answer to the first research question that the second research question, how do issues of culturally embedded knowledge affect Chinese ELLs’ ability to take the test successfully?, can be found. Although I did not foresee the extent to which the guiding research questions were, to a great degree, co-dependent, the inextricable link between both questions became apparent upon an analysis of themes.
The perception Chinese ELLs have of the OSSLT is greatly influenced by their own cultural literacy; the lens with which Chinese ELLs interpret the question is inherently cultural. The photograph must be perceived through the experiences, knowledge, and context available to a Chinese ELL writing the OSSLT, and this perception is almost certainly going to be different from that of a student writing the test in Ontario. For the Chinese ELLs participating in my study, the interpretation of the photograph of a street in Ontario—and I say street in Ontario because that is not what streets look like in China—comes together not from their own direct experiences of a snowstorm, but from meshing together outsider knowledge amassed from movies, anecdotal stories from their Canadian teachers, or other media sources. In this same vein, Chinese ELLs perceive the news report test question on the OSSLT through their prior experiences, and as the focus group discussions highlighted, the Chinese education system had not prepared them for this type of test question format. The newness of the format of the test question likely increased test-related anxiety for many participants, affecting their ability to take the test successfully or as successfully as possible. I contend that the overarching research questions guiding this study are deeply intertwined. It appears Chinese ELLs perceive the OSSLT through 1) their own knowledge of testing, 2) their own experiences, and 3) their own brand of cultural literacy.


**Limitations**

The limitations of this study related to one of three factors: the limitations of a master’s thesis, my position in relation to the research, and factors related to the design of the study.

This study was bound by the typical constraints of a master’s level thesis: time, funding, and my inexperience as a researcher were all factors that limited this study. A shorter timeframe, funding, and limited research experience certainly affect the reach of this study. I do not believe these restrictions gravely affected the quality of research because of steps I have taken to minimize the effect of the aforementioned limiting factors. As this study was partially based on Fox and Cheng’s 2007 study, it had an existing, pre-tested structure. Because Fox and Cheng’s study provided inspiration for the methodology and the focus group questions, the limiting factor of my inexperience as a researcher was mitigated by the expertise of experienced researchers.

Given my position in relation to the research, I made a conscious decision not to look for the findings I expected. For this reason, I followed the suggestion of keeping a reflection journal that allowed me to re-read my field notes at later time as an attempt to minimize bias. Although certain limitations arose from my previous connection to the research site where I taught for one year, the research site was instrumental to the success of this study. As the sole researcher responsible for so many aspects of the study, it was important that I limited personal bias to the greatest degree possible. This included relying in training and scoring rubrics from EQAO in order to ensure I was scoring
participants work in a manner that reflected realistic EQAO scoring standards. As a former scorer for the actual OSSLT, my training from and experience with EQAO increased the validity and reliability of my results and limited the effect of personal bias. The very specific nature of the participants required for this study limited the results from being generalizable across the ELL population. But this is also a positive aspect of the study because of the benefits that result from a specific study: adding to an area of research that has limited contributors and increasing both the validity and reliability of the results. One of the factors that motivated this specific research was the intent of providing insight into a specific group of ELLs in order to represent “the range of different subgroups that contribute to the texture of this population” (Fairbairn & Fox, 2009, p. 14). Additionally, the specific nature of the study means that the findings will have increased reliability and validity (Glesne, 2011; Macmillan & Schumacher, 2010). The site selected also limited the extension of the findings because the research site had a population of students from a mid-to-high socioeconomic background. Though this limits the ability to extend the findings of the study to school populations comprised mostly of lower socioeconomic status students, the benefits of being able to find, observe, survey, and interview a large number of ELL students far outweighed the drawbacks. The intent of this study was not to focus on the socio-economic factors that affect ELLs: that would be an entirely separate study. Rather, the intent was to focus on test-takers, a group of Chinese ELLs who were not affected by socio-economic challenges. The site selected
may not comprise the greatest diversity of socioeconomic backgrounds, but it does provide a larger sample size, thus improving the reliability of the study.

Choices surrounding many aspects of this study, the location of the research site, the number of study participants, were made by exploring which options would create a study that was as reliable, valid, and timely as possible. Factors contributed to positive aspects of this study: the design allowed the findings to address a gap in current research, the research site allowed for a unique and difficult to access student population to participate, and the smaller number of participants meant that this study was of a feasible size for a novice researcher to conduct.

Educational Implications

The findings of this study suggest a number of changes or adjustments that can be made by educators. This study has implications for the assessment and evaluation of ELLs, daily classroom practice, as well recommendations for curriculum and policy. In relation to the assessment and evaluation of ELLs, the results indicate that educators must be aware of the effect on the reliability and validity of these educational assessments, large-scale assessments or classroom-based assessments, for ELLs. In relation to large-scale assessments, the findings of this study emphatically support the concept of special preparation for ELLs for large-scale assessments as recommended by Fairbairn and Fox’s 2009 study. It is important to differentiate between familiarizing students with the expectations and formats of a specific assessment and the kind of test preparation that focuses on the test over learning. Including varied assignments and
creating tests that utilize a spectrum of question types allow educators to prepare students for a large-scale assessment like the OSSLT without forgoing other educational opportunities. Ensuring familiarity with a variety of test questions will allow students to become test literate and better able to demonstrate their true level of knowledge or skill (Usman, 2009).

Educators should be cognizant of the fact that some students may have a lack of certain culturally related knowledge. Providing the context for in class activities and assessments can have a number of benefits: improving the validity and reliability of assessments, allowing educators to better understand how to support ELLs, and also helping ELLs in becoming less disadvantaged because of cultural literacy. Given the self-awareness the participants in this study revealed, educators should consider asking students how they can best be supported during assessments. Similarly, educators should strive to ensure that all methods of assessment avoid colloquialisms, minimize the language load when possible, and allow appropriate accommodations supported by research (Abedi, 2009; Rivera & Collum, 2004).

The findings of this study have a variety of implications for the policy document entitled English Language Learners: ESL and ELD Programs and Services (2007). With respect to assessment, the current policy document for English Language Learners addresses how ELLs should be assessed and evaluated, echoing the findings of the current study. Section 2.9 of the 2007 policy document addresses how, when, and if students learning English should participate in large-scale assessments:
2.9.1 English language learners should participate in the Grade 3 and Grade 6 provincial assessments in reading, writing, and mathematics, and in the Grade 9 provincial assessment in mathematics, when they have acquired the level of proficiency in English required for success (p. 28).

2.9.2 Decisions about exemptions or deferrals will be made according to the requirements articulated in the EQAO administration guide.

2.9.3 English language learners should take the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test when they have acquired the level of proficiency in English required for success.

2.9.4 English language learners should participate in national and international assessments when they have acquired the level of proficiency in English required for success. (p. 29)

The findings of this study suggest some possible changes to help ELLs in regards to current practices surrounding large-scale assessment. While it would be encouraging for a student not to have to contend with the issues of cultural and test literacy, instead the massive changes that would be required for this to take place are less likely to transpire. The findings of this study suggest that educators should take into account more than the level of English proficiency a student has achieved. Educators should also consider the level of cultural literacy and test literacy a student has achieved. This is especially important for the assessment policy for ELLs for the OSSLT because of its status as the only large-scale assessment as a graduation requirement.
Theoretical Implications

The findings of this study add to the body of research concerned with ELLs. It adds a very precise perspective to existing research, and illuminates existing challenges that Chinese ELLs in particular face when writing the OSSLT. This study also adds to the existing literature concerned with cultural literacy and assessment; given the limited scope of existing literature, the findings of this study underscore the importance cultural literacy has in connection with large-scale assessment. Given the limited research available regarding large-scale assessment and the perspective of the test-taker, the findings of this study help to reduce the existing research gap in this area.

Future Research

The findings of this study have implications for research in three main areas: further research concerned with test-taker perspectives, investigating how/if large-scale assessments are being used outside of the intended context, and further research concerning the issue of cultural literacy when assessing ELLs.

This study illuminated, albeit admittedly in a specific context, the self-awareness many test-takers have of how they can be best supported. As is mentioned throughout this study, a dearth of literature is concerned with the perspective of the person actually being evaluated by a large-scale assessment: the student. Another potential avenue of further research suggested by the findings of this research is an exploration of the rapidly expanding international education market and how large-scale assessments are being used in this context. A general survey of how often large-
scale assessments are being used outside of their originally-intended context (like the OSSLT being used outside of Ontario) would be beneficial knowledge for ministries of education, test designers, and educators alike. Because the Ontario Ministry of Education has agreed to allow our curriculum and diploma to be taught to students living far beyond the geographical boundaries of the province, and educators therefore need to understand how this will impact students, especially in regards to a student’s graduation with their OSSD.

The findings of this study highlighted the possible effect of a student’s level of cultural literacy can have on her/his ability to best demonstrate the true level of skill, knowledge, or ability he/she has attained. For this reason, further research investigating how to improve test design so as to limit the negative effect of cultural literacy should be another area explored in future research.

Conclusion

Although certain limitations are inevitable in a study at the Master’s level, I believe that this study has yielded findings that should inform teaching practice, policy, and the creation of large-scale assessments of ELLs. The findings of this study suggest that there is value in seeking the innate understanding many ELLs have of their own needs. Results from this study emphasize the effect a lack of cultural knowledge can have on the validity and reliability of large-scale assessments like the OSSLT and should give educators pause during the design phase of assessments. If the intent of the OSSLT is not to measure a student’s cultural literacy, test designers and educators must balance the
potential disadvantages that ELLs encounter on the test through careful selection of question topics, selection of or removal of photographs, and improving an ELL’s familiarity with test question formats in order to improve the reliability and validity of the assessment. I assert that this research may serve to highlight future areas of inquiry that explore, in particular, two areas: 1) the impact of cultural literacy on large-scale assessment results for ELLs, and 2) further exploration of test-taker perspectives of large-scale assessments.

It is my hope that this research generates interest in improving the reliability and validity of large-scale assessments; regardless of one’s feeling about this method of testing, large-scale assessment is a part of education systems around the world, and is being used for an increasing number of purposes and increasing number of countries. It is the intent of this research to ensure that large-scale assessments do not needlessly discourage ELLs from pursuing and achieving their learning goals. As a secondary school diploma is often the first step one must take toward achieving those goals, improving assessments like the OSSLT is imperative if educators wish to ensure we are supporting ELLs in every manner possible.

Chinese ELLs have a unique perspective and interpretation of many different elements that combine to create the news report test question. The format of the test question, the topic of the test question, the accompanying photograph, and the vocabulary are all aspects of the testing process that have been perceived in a different manner (based on the scoring criteria used by EQAO) than test designers intended. That all
Chinese ELLs do not interpret the elements of the test question in exactly the same manner must be emphasized. What should be underscored is that this group of learners is united by the fact that they interpret the test question in a different manner than was intended. Educators, test designers, and policymakers should take into account this difference of perspective. The subtitle of this thesis queries if a picture is, indeed, worth 1000 words; the results of this study demonstrate that yes, a picture is often worth 1000 words, but with the caveat that the writers (as a function of their culture, background, and English abilities) may not use the same 1000 words.
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Appendix A: Accommodations

Timing/Scheduling
1. Test time increased
2. Breaks provided during test sessions
3. Test schedule extended
4. Subtests flexibly scheduled
5. Test administered at time of day most beneficial to test-taker

Setting
1. Test individually administered
2. Test administered in small group
3. Test administered in location with minimal distraction
4. Test administered in familiar room
5. Test-taker tested in separate location (or carrel)
6. Test administered in ESL/Bilingual classroom
7. Individual administration provided outside school
8. Test-taker provided preferential seating
9. Increased or decreased opportunity for movement provided
10. Teacher faces test-taker
11. Special/appropriate lighting provided
12. Adaptive or special furniture provided
13. Adaptive pencils provided
14. Adapted keyboards provided
15. Person familiar with test-taker administers test
16. ESL/Bilingual teacher administers test
17. Additional one-to-one support provided during test administration in general classroom

Presentation
1. Directions repeated in English
2. Directions read aloud in English
3. Audio-taped directions provided in English
4. Key words or phrases in directions highlighted
5. Directions simplified
6. Audio-taped directions provided in native language
7. Directions translated into native language
8. Cues provided to remain on task
9. Directions explained/clarified in English
10. Directions explained/clarified in native language
11. Both oral and written English directions in English provided
12. Written directions provided in native language
13. Oral directions provided in native language
14. Test items read aloud in English
15. Test items read aloud in simplified/sheltered English
16. Audio-taped test items provided in English
17. Audio-taped test items provided in native language
18. Test items read aloud in native language
19. Audio-taped test items provided in native language
20. Assistive listening devices, amplification, noise buffers, appropriate acoustics provided
21. Key words and phrases in test highlighted
22. Words on test clarified
23. Word lists (mono- or dual-language dictionaries or glossaries) provided
24. Enlarged print, magnifying equipment, Braille provided
25. Memory aids, fact charts, list of formulas and/or research sheets provided
26. Templates, masks, or markers provided
27. Cues (e.g., arrows and stop signs) provided on answer form
28. Acetate shield for page provided
29. Coloured stickers or highlighters for visual cues provided
30. Augmentative communication systems or strategies provided
31. Simplified/sheltered English version of test provided
32. Side-by-side bilingual versions of the test provided
33. Translated version of the test provided
34. Test interpreted for the deaf or hearing impaired /use of sign language provided
35. Electric translator provided

Response
1. Test-taker marks answers in test booklet
2. Test administrator transfers test-taker’s answers
3. Test-taker’s transferred responses checked for accurate marking
4. Copying assistance provided between drafts
5. Test-taker types or uses a machine to respond
6. Test-taker indicates answers by pointing or other method
7. Papers secured to work area with tape/magnets
8. Mounting systems, slant boards, easels provided change position of paper, alter test-taker’s position
9. Physical assistance provided
10. Enlarged answer sheets provided
11. Alternative writing systems provided
12. Test-taker verifies understanding of directions
13. Test-taker dictates or uses a scribe to respond in English
14. Test-taker responds on audio-tape in English
15. Test-taker responds native language
16. Spelling assistance, spelling dictionaries, spell/grammar checker provided

Other

1. Out-of-level testing provided
2. Special test preparations provided (Rivera & Collum, 2004).
Appendix B: News Report Test Question

Writing a News Report

1 Task: Write a news report on the next page based on the headline and picture below.
- You will have to make up the facts and information to answer some or all of the following questions: Who? What? Where? When? Why? How?
- You must relate your newspaper report to both the headline and the picture.

Purpose and Audience: to report on an event for the readers of a newspaper
Length: The lined space provided for your written work indicates the approximate length of the writing expected.

Storm Shuts Down Region

Rough Notes
Use the space below for rough notes. Nothing you write in this space will be scored.

Write your report on the lines provided on the following page.
Appendix C: Focus Group Questions

General Questions:

1) How often do you speak English outside of school?

2) Do you read the newspaper? If so, how often?

3) How is this test activity similar to tests you take for your Chinese schooling?

4) How does this test activity differ than tests you take for your Chinese schooling?

5) How did you like this test activity?

6) Do you think you did well on this activity?

Focus group interview questions for the new report test question:

1) What did you think of the news report writing task? Did you like it? Dislike it? Why?

2) Did you find it easy or difficult? Why?

3) Did you understand what you were supposed to do to answer the question?

4) What did you see in the picture? How did you connect the title and the picture? Was connecting the title and the picture easy or difficult? Why?

5) How did you address who, what, where, when, why and/or how?

6) Who did you have in mind when you wrote this news report?

7) Did you think about spelling and grammar when you were answering this question?
Appendix D: Scoring Guide for OSSLT

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Descriptor</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Blank</td>
<td>The page is blank with nothing written or drawn in the space provided.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illegible</td>
<td>The response is illegible or irrelevant to the prompt.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Off topic</td>
<td>The response is off topic.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Code 10 | The response is related to headline and/or photo but is not a news report.  
OR  
The response is a news report related to the headline and/or photo. It identifies an event, but provides no supporting details, or provides details that are unrelated to the event. There is no evidence of organization. |
| Code 20 | The response is related to headline and/or photo but only partly in the form of a news report.  
OR  
The response is a news report related to the headline and/or photo, but the focus on an event is unclear or inconsistent. There are insufficient supporting details: too few or repetitious. There is limited evidence of organization. |
| Code 30 | The response is a news report related to the headline and photo with a clear focus on an event. There are insufficient and/or vague supporting details or the connection of the details to the event is not always clear. There is evidence of organization, but lapses distract from the overall communication. |
| Code 40 | The response is a news report related to the headline and photo with a clear and consistent focus on an event. There are sufficient supporting details, however, only some are specific. The organization is mechanical and any lapses do not distract from the overall communication. |
| Code 50 | The response is a news report related to the headline and photo with a clear and consistent focus on an event. There are sufficient specific supporting details to develop the news report. The organization is logical. |
| Code 60 | The response is a news report related to the headline and photo with a clear and consistent focus on an event. There are sufficient specific supporting details, which are thoughtfully chosen to develop the news report. The organization is coherent demonstrating a thoughtful progression of ideas. |
Appendix E: Permission Email to Use Instrument

Hello Dana,

Thank you for your message. I'd be very happy for you to design your study instrument based on our 2007 study below.


Good luck with your study.

Liying

Liying Cheng, Ph. D.
Professor, Assessment and Evaluation
A213, Faculty of Education
Queen's University
511 Union Street
Kingston, ON K7M 5R7 Canada
613-533-6000 ex# 77431
Appendix F: Ethical Clearance

January 24, 2012

Ms. Dana Knaar, Master’s Student
Faculty of Education, Duncan McArthur Hall
Queen’s University
511 Union Street
Kingston, ON K7M 5R7

GREB Ref #: GEDUC-607.12; Romeo # 6006573
Title: “GEDUC-607.12 English Language Learners and Large Scale Assessment: The Experiences and Perceptions of Chinese English Language Learners Writing the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test”

Dear Ms. Knaar:

The General Research Ethics Board (GREB), by means of a delegated board review, has cleared your proposal entitled “GEDUC-607.12 English Language Learners and Large Scale Assessment: The Experiences and Perceptions of Chinese English Language Learners Writing the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test” for ethical compliance with the Tri-Council Guidelines (TCPS) and Queen’s ethics policies. In accordance with the Tri-Council Guidelines (article D 1.6) and Senate Terms of Reference (article G), your project has been cleared for one year. At the end of each year, the GREB will ask if your project has been completed and if not, what changes have occurred or will occur in the next year.

You are reminded of your obligation to advise the GREB, with a copy to your unit REB, of any adverse event(s) that occur during this one year period (access this form at https://eservices.queensu.ca/romeo_researcher/ and click Events - GREB Adverse Event Report). An adverse event includes, but is not limited to, a complaint, a change or unexpected event that alters the level of risk for the researcher or participants or situation that requires a substantial change in approach to a participant(s). You are also advised that all adverse events must be reported to the GREB within 48 hours.

You are also reminded that all changes that might affect human participants must be cleared by the GREB. For example you must report changes to the level of risk, applicant characteristics, and implementations of new procedures. To make an amendment, access the application at https://eservices.queensu.ca/romeo_researcher/ and click Events - GREB Amendment to Approved Study Form. These changes will automatically be sent to the Ethics Coordinator, Guil Irving, at the Office of Research Services or irvingg@queensu.ca for further review and clearance by the GREB or GREB Chair.

On behalf of the General Research Ethics Board, I wish you continued success in your research.

Yours sincerely,

Joan Stevenson, Ph.D.
Professor and Chair
General Research Ethics Board

cc: Dr. Liying Cheng, Faculty Supervisor
    Dr. Lesly Wade-Woolley, Chair, Unit REB
    Erin Wickett, c/o Graduate Studies and Bureau of Research
Appendix G: Letter of Information
“The Experiences and Perceptions of Chinese English Language Learners Taking the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test”

This study has been granted clearance according to the recommended principles of Canadian ethics guidelines and Queen's policies. This research is being conducted by Dana Knarr under the supervision of Dr. Liying Cheng in the Faculty of Education at Queen’s University in Kingston, Ontario.

What is this study about? The purpose of this research is to examine the perspectives of Chinese English language learners taking the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test (OSSLT). The study will require a maximum of two hours of your time during two separate sessions. Both sessions will take place during your evening self-study time. If you choose to participate, you will take part in a 45-minute writing activity, with the possibility of taking part in a focus group after completing the activity. I will randomly select a smaller group from the class to take part in the focus group. The focus group will be a 60-minute discussion about the writing activity, and will ask you to think about your perceptions and experiences while completing the activity. I will be collecting the writing activity that is completed, and I will be audio recording the discussions during the focus group sessions. You will not be writing your name on the news article activity so that the results of the activity will be able to remain confidential to the extent possible. The day after completing the news article activity, general advice will be given regarding how to improve the quality of your written responses for the OSSLT. You will also be given a chance to ask questions about the OSSLT, and will be able to learn from this practice activity. There are no known physical, psychological, economic, or social risks associated with this study.

Is my participation voluntary? Yes, you should not feel required to answer any questions in either the written activity or the focus group that you find objectionable or that makes you feel uncomfortable. You may also withdraw all or part of your data at any time with no effect on your standing in school and without pressure or consequence to you.

What will happen to my responses? I will keep your responses confidential to the extent possible. Only I as the researcher will have access to this information, apart from the other participants who will also be involved in the focus group. To help me ensure confidentiality, please do not put your name on any of the research study answer sheets. The scores from the news article activity will only be used to describe the range of abilities in the participant group. In the data may also be published in professional journals or presented at scientific conferences, but any such presentations will be of general findings and will never breach individual confidentiality. The data will be retained for a minimum of five years. After five years, the data collected will be retained for a minimum of five years. If the data is used for secondary analysis it will contain no identifying information. Should you be interested, you are entitled to a copy of the findings. There will be no remuneration provided for participation in this study.
What if I have concerns? Any questions about study participation may be directed to Dana Knarr at 3dk12@queensu.ca or my supervisor Dr. Liying Cheng at 613-533-6000 ex# 77431 & living.cheng@queens.ca. Any ethical concerns about the study may be directed to the Chair of the General Research Ethics Board at 613-533-6081 or chair.GREB@queensu.ca.

Again, thank you. Your interest in participating in this research study is greatly appreciated.

This study has been granted clearance according to the recommended principles of Canadian ethics guidelines, and Queen's policies.
Appendix H: Consent Form
“The Experiences and Perceptions of Chinese English Language Learners Taking the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test”

Name (please print clearly): ______________________________________

1. I have read the Letter of Information and Consent Form and have had any questions answered to my satisfaction.

2. I understand that I will be participating in the study called “The Experiences and Perceptions of Chinese English Language Learners Taking the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test. I understand that this means that I will be asked to complete a 45-minute writing activity, and possibly participate in a 60-minute focus group discussion about the writing activity. I understand the minimum amount of time involved in this study is 45 minutes, and the maximum time involved in participating in this study is 95 minutes. I understand my writing activity will be collected by the researcher. I also understand that I will be recorded by an audio recorder while participating in the focus group.

3. I understand that my participation in this study is voluntary and I may withdraw all or part of my data at any time without any effect to my standing in the school without pressure or consequence. I understand that every effort will be made to maintain the confidentiality to the extent possible of the data now and in the future. Only researchers in the Faculty of Education will have access to this area. The data may also be published in professional journals or presented at scientific conferences, but any such presentations will be of general findings and will never breach individual confidentiality. Should you be interested, you are entitled to a copy of the findings.

4. I understand that the purpose of the study is to better understand the perceptions of Chinese English Language Learners writing the OSSLT, that I will be involved in a nature of participation, informed that involvement consists of writing a sample activity and participating in a focus group, and that this study will involve audio recording devices.

5. Any questions about study participation may be directed to Dana Knarr at 3dk12@queensu.ca or my supervisor Dr. Liying Cheng at 613-533-6000 ex# 77431 & living.cheng@queens.ca. Any ethical concerns about the study may be directed to the Chair of the General Research Ethics Board at 613-533-6081 or chair.GREB@queens.ca.

I have read the above statements and freely consent to participate in this research:
Student Signature: _______________________________ Date: _____________________
Parent/Guardian Signature: _______________________________ Date: _____________________

If you would like a copy of the results of this study, please include your email or postal address here:

___________________________________
___________________________________
___________________________________

Please sign one copy of this Consent Form and return to Dana Knarr. Retain the second copy for your records.
Appendix I: Effective Accommodations

1. Extended time
2. Breaks offered between sessions
3. Bilingual glossaries
4. Bilingual dictionaries
5. English glossaries
6. English dictionaries
7. Directions read in English
8. Directions read in Native language
9. Directions translated into native language

10. Simplified English

11. Side-by-side bilingual version of the test
12. Test version in the native language
13. Dictation of answers or use of a scribe

*BOLD denotes a suggestion that was suggested by a participant in my study
*Italics denote an accommodation that has an effect on the validity of an assessment