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A Review of the Online ESL Assessment of the Ontario Secondary School Diploma (OSSD) System from Canada

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Abstract

The Ontario Secondary School Diploma (OSSD) system is widely recognized as a cornerstone of Ontario's education system in Canada. Originally, it was designed to get students prepared for the workforce and post-secondary education. Over time, it was now adopted in many countries worldwide for international students. Among the diverse components of the OSSD system, the English as a Second Language (ESL) testing plays a crucial role in assessing as well as improving the English language skills of non-native speakers. This paper examines the construct, design, scoring, and validity of the ESL assessment within the OSSD framework, emphasizing its strengths while identifying areas for enhancement. By analyzing these aspects, this paper aims to offer a thorough understanding of the ESL assessment's efficacy and its congruence with the OSSD educational objectives.

Keywords

Ontario Secondary School Diploma (OSSD); Online; ESL assessment; Progressive evaluation; Formative; Summative; Rubrics; Criteria; Visualization of grades

1. Introduction

The OSSD system is a cornerstone of Canadian secondary education, emphasizing critical thinking, academic excellence and practical skills for students from Grade 9 to Grade 12. If registered in this system with an Ontario Education Number (OEN), students in other countries could apply for universities around the world with the identification as Canadian Ontario Students, based on their average score of the 6 subjects in Grade 12 and also their international standardized English certificates like IELTS, TOEFL or others. As OSSD is recognized worldwide, with the education motto *Support Every Child, Reach Every Student*, the Ontario Ministry of Education allows the agencies to offer online OSSD courses for non-native English students who are located in the other countries.

The graduation requirements include 3 aspects: 30 credits (18 compulsory and 12 optional, each course 1 credit), 40 hours of Community Involvement Activities as well as successfully passing the standardized Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test (OSSLT) or passing the Ontario Literacy Credit Course (OLC4O).

The most attractive is that the OSSD online assessment applies progressive and diverse evaluation instead of make-or-break exams, and the grades are visualized to teachers and students through all the process. The parents could also track the students' real-time grades at any time with the students' account. For every OSSD subject, the summative assignments, the unit tests and the mid-term project accounts for 70% of the total score, while the final project represents the rest of 30%. With its stress on progressive evaluation and various curriculum options as well as its advantage of formative assessment at a great ratio, OSSD increasingly attracts Chinese teenagers who suffer from the high-stake examinations and even have mental and psychological problems. Especially with the Chinese policy of Diversion in Secondary and College Entrance Examinations getting more strict in recent years, a growing number of Chinese private international schools or institutions seek partnership with OSSD agencies. This policy aims to orientate students into various educational tracks according to their performance in the secondary and college entrance examinations, such as academic high schools, vocational schools, universities, or vocational colleges [1].

Among all the subjects in OSSD system, for non-native English speakers, the ESL is a pathway to achieving the OSSD and even obtaining higher education opportunities in English-speaking institutions. The ESL assessment measures students' competence to apply English in both social and academic contexts, ensuring that they meet the language requirements for achievement in Ontario's schools and even beyond.

This review concentrates on four key factors of the ESL assessment to show the strengths and shortcomings of OSSD system as follows:

(1) Construct: What language competencies does the test intend to evaluate?

(2) Design: How is the test organized to assess these competences?

(3) Scoring: How are students' performances graded and interpreted?

(4) Validity: Does the test effectively gauge what it purports to measure?

Through addressing these questions, this paper offers a critical evaluation of the ESL assessment's alignment with its objectives and its effectiveness in improving students' language abilities. In addition, it provides more perspectives about OSSD system for Chinese families, schools and institutions to get familiar with it, thus they could have more choices other than the high-stake examinations to reduce the pressure of Chinese students, parents, as well as teachers.

2. Construct

2.1. Definition of construct

The construct of the ESL assessment within the framework of OSSD is to measure the English proficiency of students who are not English native speakers. Through formative and summative assessment, it aims to identify their abilities in listening, speaking, reading, and writing, which are pivotal for academic achievement and daily communication in a Canadian high school background. The ESL assessment is designed to gauge students' current English levels and offer them a way to improve their English skills progressively with instruction of different levels.

2.2. Theoretical foundations

The ESL assessment's construct is based on **communicative language teaching (CLT) principles, which emphasize the importance of using language in real-life contexts** [2]. This approach conforms to the OSSD's objective of getting students prepared for practical, real-world challenges. In addition, the test integrates components of task-based language teaching (TBLT), which evaluates students' competence to complete specific tasks with English [3].

2.3. Consistency with OSSD goals

The ESL assessment's construct is closely complied with the OSSD's stress on communication, critical thinking and application of knowledge. By evaluating students' ability to apply English in academic and social contexts, the test ensures that they are prepared for the demands of Ontario's education system and even beyond.

2.4. Broader implications

The construct of the ESL assessment also reflects broader tendency in language assessment, such as the shift

from discrete-point testing (concentrating on independent language elements) to integrated testing (assessing multiple and interdisciplinary skills simultaneously). This shift complies with the increasing acknowledgment that language proficiency is a multifaceted construct that cannot be fully captured by assessing individual skills in isolation [4].

3. Design

3.1. Assessment structure

The design of the ESL assessment in the OSSD system is comprehensive and well-organized, including listening, speaking, reading, and writing sections, each component designed to assess specific skills. The listening section assesses the understanding academic lectures and daily conversations, while the speaking section measures vocabulary, grammar and fluency. The reading section may involve comprehension and critical thinking, while the writing section tests the ability to edit clear and logical essays on given topics. The assessment is often designed in a way that increases in difficulty since ESL students progress through various levels. OSSD ESL are divided in 7 levels, AO, BO, CO, DO, EO, ENG3U and ENG4U. For the ESL assessment in each level, there are 4 tests, a midterm project and a final project for 10 units. Besides, in each unit there are generally about 3–6 formative assignments and 1 summative assignment.

3.2. Assignment design

The formative assignments are normally in forms of quiz, practice, writing, audio or video with no deadline while the summative ones are usually writing, audio or video tasks with deadlines, all related to the topics, grammar and vocabulary of the units.

3.3. Test design

Every test has 5 sections, each corresponding to one of the key language skills. For instance:

(1) Reading: Students read an article and write answers to 4 comprehension questions;

(2) Grammar: Students complete 3–4 grammar prompts in forms of multiple-choice or filling in the blanks;

(3) Vocabulary: Students complete 1–2 words prompts in forms of choice or correction;

(4) Listening: Students listen to an audio recording before answering 4 comprehension prompts;

(5) Writing: Students write a paragraph with 8–10 sentences according to the given topic to demonstrate their ability to organize and express ideas in English.

It's worth mentioning that there's no speaking section in the tests, while speaking assessment is included in the unit assignments and projects as progressive evaluation [5].

3.4. Project design

For midterm and final projects, two parts are presented. In Part A, there are still two sections, where students answer the questions in the list using information from the listening and reading to complete Part 1, and then write an essay answering the given question in Part 2. In Part B, students speak for about 2 minutes according to describe something or give examples and reasons according to the prompt before submitting the video and PDF document.

3.5. Task types

The assessment comprises various task types to evaluate different aspects of language abilities. For integrated tasks, students may need to write an answer after reading an article and even listening to an audio, integrating at the same time reading, listening and writing skills. For discrete-point tasks, students may complete grammar exercises to assess specific language knowledge.

3.6. Authenticity and relevance

The assessment tasks are designed to reflect practical language use, assuring that students are evaluated on their ability to apply English in real-life contexts. For example, the speaking section may include role-plays related to daily situations, such as asking for directions, describing someone, ordering food at a restaurant or talking about experiences students have in their lifetime, etc.

3.7. Practical considerations

In addition, the design of the ESL assessment takes into consideration practical considerations, like time limits and resource availability. For example, the test is usually administered in an only sitting, assigning a

specific duration to each section. This format guarantees that the test is feasible to administer in a school setting while still offering a comprehensive evaluation of students' language skills.

4. Scoring

4.1. Scoring criteria

Within the OSSD system, any student getting a score beyond 50 points could pass the course and get the credit as the full score is 100 for each course. The summative assignments, the unit tests and the mid-term project accounts for 70% of the total score, while the final project represents the rest 30%. The formative assignments are not graded, but the performance would be gauged by grading teacher through the comments in the midterm and final report card.

Like every other course, scoring for the ESL

assessment is based on a standardized rubric that measures students' performance across multiple criteria. Each section of the test features its own scoring guidelines, which are meticulously designed to reflect the intricacy and significance of the proficiency being evaluated. For instance, in the speaking section, students are assessed on their intonation, pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary and overall communication competence. Likewise, in the writing section, students are graded on essay content, structure, language use, and overall coherence. The scores obtained in each section determine the overall ESL performance, which guides students' subsequent learning and progression.

The ESL assessment applies rubric-based scoring to measure students' performances. Each assignment, test and project is scored according to an evaluation methodology called KICA. K represents knowledge and understanding, I symbolizes thinking and inquiry, C

Categories	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4
Knowledge and Understanding	Demonstrates limited knowledge and understanding of content	Demonstrates some knowledge and understanding of content	Demonstrates considerable knowledge and understanding of content	Demonstrates thorough knowledge and understanding of content
Thinking	Uses planning, processing and critical/creative thinking skills with limited effectiveness	Uses planning, processing and critical/creative thinking skills with some effectiveness	Uses planning, processing and critical/creative thinking skills with considerable effectiveness	Uses planning, processing and critical/creative thinking skills with a high degree of effectiveness
Communication	Expresses and organizes ideas and information for different audiences and purposes with limited effectiveness	Expresses and organizes ideas and information for different audiences and purposes with some effectiveness	Expresses and organizes ideas and information for different audiences and purposes with considerable effectiveness	Expresses and organizes ideas and information for different audiences and purposes with a high degree of effectiveness
Application	Applies knowledge and skills in familiar and new contexts with limited effectiveness	Applies knowledge and skills in familiar and new contexts with some effectiveness	Applies knowledge and skills in familiar and new contexts with considerable effectiveness	Applies knowledge and skills in familiar and new contexts with a high degree of effectiveness

Figure 1. KICA.

Knowledge	Level 0 (0-49%)	Level 1 (50-59%)	Level 2 (60-69%)	Level 3 (70-79%)	Level 4 (80-100%)
Identifies relevant sources (4 marks)	Student meets little or none of the requirements	Few sources chosen are relevant to the topic; writer may require significant additional research	Some sources chosen are relevant to the topic; writer may need additional sources to complete research	Most sources chosen are relevant to the topic. May require a small amount of additional research	Sources chosen are highly relevant to the topic; sources add greatly to research potential; few, if any, additional sources needed
Credibility (2 marks)	Student meets little or none of the requirements	1 source is scholarly	2 sources are scholarly	3 sources are scholarly	4 or more sources are scholarly sources

Figure 2. Knowledge and understanding.

means communication while A is short for application [6].

The following figures are adapted all Rosedale Moodle (Rosedale International Education Inc. from Toronto provides international schools around the world a holistic education solution as OSSD) illustrate how KICA works with the detailed rubrics for students' performance in different levels (**Figure 1**, **Figure 2**, **Figure 3**, **Figure 4** and **Figure 5**).

As we can see from the above figures, there are still detailed breakdowns for each component of KICA. For instance, this is an assignment of 26 marks, and K, I, C, A occupies separately 6, 6, 7 and 7 marks. Furthermore, in K section, identifying relevant sources represents 4 marks while credibility 2 marks. In I section, annotations

Inquiry	Level 0 (0-49%)	Level 1 (50-59%)	Level 2 (60-69%)	Level 3 (70-79%)	Level 4 (80-100%)
Annotations (4 marks)	Student meets little or none of the requirements.	Most annotations are either too short or too long; annotations do not describe the source material; annotations offer no insight	Some annotations may be too short or too long; annotations adequately describe the source material, but lack insight	Most annotations are succinct; most comprehensively describe the source material; some offer insight into the source material	Annotations succinctly and comprehensively describe the source material; annotations offer great insight into the source material
Evaluations (2 marks)	Student meets little or none of the requirements.	Evaluation mostly lacking in explaining why the sources were chosen; demonstrates little understanding of research process	Evaluation sometimes explains why the sources were chosen; demonstrates some understanding of research process	Most evaluations explain why the sources were chosen; demonstrates an understanding of research process	Evaluation clearly explains why the sources were chosen; demonstrates a clear understanding of research process: offers insight into source

Figure 3. Thinking and inquiry.

Communication	Level 0 (0-49%)	Level 1 (50-59%)	Level 2 (60-69%)	Level 3 (70-79%)	Level 4 (80-100%)
Organizes writing (structure of individual annotation) (2 marks)	Student meets little or none of the requirements	Organizes writing with limited success	Organizes writing with some success	Organizes writing with considerable success	Organizes writing with a high degree of success
Uses grammar and language conventions correctly (5 marks)	Student meets little or none of the requirements	Errors are distracting, but the meaning is still clear. Only some of the assignment requirements were met	Some significant errors are present, but the overall meaning is clear. About half of the assignment requirements were met	Occasional minor errors do not distract the reader. The majority of assignment requirements were met	Virtually free from mechanical, grammatical, punctuation, and spelling errors. All of the assignment requirements were met

Figure 4. Communication.

Category	Level 0 (0-49%)	Level 1 (50-59%)	Level 2 (60-69%)	Level 3 (70-79%)	Level 4 (80-100%)
Application					
Sound reasoning for why the thinker of their choice had a more significant impact than others (7 marks)	Student meets little or none of the requirements	The student has little knowledge of the topic. Argument did not implement course content and student misunderstood the lesson readings	The student begins to understand the lesson readings to start making an argument. However, most points are general and vague. Argument does not implement course content	The student sufficiently understands the lesson readings to make an argument. The argument uses course content but does so vaguely and with some error	The student clearly understands the lesson readings. Argument includes specific terms and knowledge from the course in an accurate manner

Figure 5. Application.

account for 4 marks while evaluations 2 marks. Finally, in C section, organizing writing (structure of individual annotation) is 2 marks while using grammar and language conventions correctly 5 marks.

4.2. Scoring process

The scoring process is designed to ensure fairness and consistency. Trained grading teachers based in Canada rather than the classroom teachers evaluate students' performances with standardized rubrics before providing feedback with annotations to every assignment (**Figure 6**), test or project on students' own Moodle.

However, the classroom teachers could collaborate with grading teachers to recommend personalized learning strategies and help students comply with the rubrics throughout the school year. It is pertinent to mention that every summative assignment and project has a deadline set by the classroom teachers, which could only be postponed with acceptable reasons like sick leave. If students don't submit before the deadline, the full marks will be 20% off. However, if students don't make up the submission 5 days after the deadline, the student will get a zero for the relative task and no longer have access to make up. Additionally, if students violate the academic conventions with the behaviors like plagiarism, they will be given zero as a result.

Even with the visualization of real-time grades in Moodle for the students and parents-student achievement in OSSD is also formally communicated to them through the Ontario mid-term and final report cards to their emails, following Ministry of Education report card templates. Midterm report cards are issued when students have completed the first 50% of the ESL course and the midterm project [7]. Final report cards are issued after the student's final project. In the report cards, apart from the score, there would also be comments from grading teachers for students' strengths and areas for improvement in their time management, independent work, consistency and assignment quality, etc. Besides, the evaluation in 6 aspects is also illustrated in the report card, such as responsibility, organization, independent work, collaboration, initiative and self-regulation and the grades in this section are in forms of E, G, S, N, separately representing "Excellent, Good, Satisfactory, Needs" improvement.
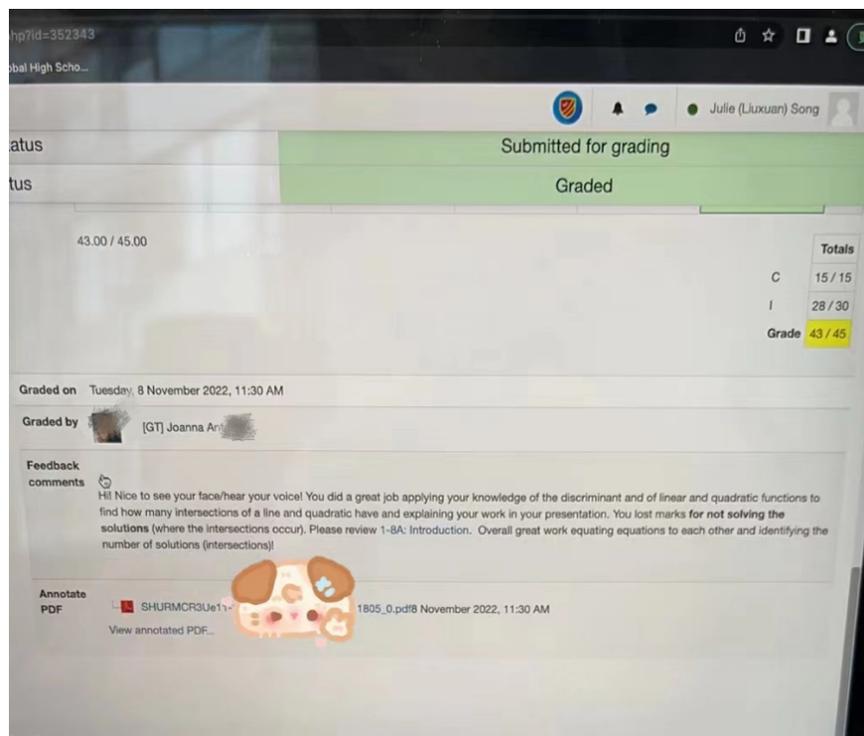

Figure 6. Feedback of grading teacher.

4.3. Scoring review

With the feedback and annotations of each assignment, test and project, students could clearly understand why they lost the points and therefore make adjustments subsequently.

5. Validity

5.1. Content validity

The online ESL assessment within the OSSD system demonstrates significant content validity, as it evaluates all four core language skills as well as integrates tasks reflecting real-life language use. The validity of this assessment is ensured through rigorous development and ongoing evaluation and is further strengthened with its alignment with the OSSD's educational aims. The assessment is designed to comply with the language ability standards acknowledged by Canadian and global educational institutions. To keep validity, the assessment content is regularly updated to reflect current academic requirements and language use.

5.2. Construct validity

The assessment's construct validity is supported by its foundational principles derived from CLT and TBLT, both emphasizing the significance of using language in meaningful contexts. Conversely, some critics argue that the test could better assess students' proficiency in using English in academic settings, in comparison to everyday scenarios [4].

5.3. Criterion-related validity

This assessment demonstrates strong criterion-related validity, since students' scores are positively related to their performance in other language assessments and their academic achievements in other courses.

5.4. Face validity

The assessment has high face validity, because students and educators generally take it as a fair and relevant evaluation of English proficiency. For instance, as shown in **Figure 7**, the vocabulary tested are from the learning content in the units. Besides, in **Figure 8**, the requirements are specified that students should apply the new terms and vocabulary that they have learned in the past two units. The grading system or grading teacher will offer the precise feedback according to the students' answer and the criteria.

In addition, the test forms are various from reading, choice, correction, listening and writing, while the forms of the assignments and projects are normally audios, videos, graphs, editorial articles, sometimes group tasks or creative work like describing one innovation with a drawing. Those diverse evaluations all contribute to the high face validity. However, perhaps some students would consider certain tasks (e.g., audio or video assignment with speaking tasks, or group work) as stressful, which may influence their performance.

5.5. Broader implications for validity

The validity of the ESL assessment also has broader implications beyond its immediate scope for educational accessibility and equity. For instance, students with diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds may encounter distinct challenges in showing their language proficiency. Guaranteeing that the assessment is fair and accessible to all students is therefore essential for preserving its validity and supporting the OSSD's commitment to inclusivity [8–10].

6. Conclusion and recommendations

Different from education programs based on a high-stake examination model, the OSSD curriculum provides a progressive evaluation model which weighs all term work as an important portion of a student's final grade. English skills and achieving academic success in a Canadian high school setting. Benefiting from this model, students have diverse chances to prove their efforts throughout each course. The OSSD evaluation also allows multiple formats of student work products, such as projects, case studies, reports, exams and others, where students not only have the ability to, but also are obligated to showcase their learning outcomes. The program provides educators with the necessary system-level support and flexibility to facilitate tailored learning and evaluation.

The online ESL assessment in the OSSD framework is a well-structured evaluation tool that effectively measures students' English proficiency and supports their academic achievement with less anxiety. There are
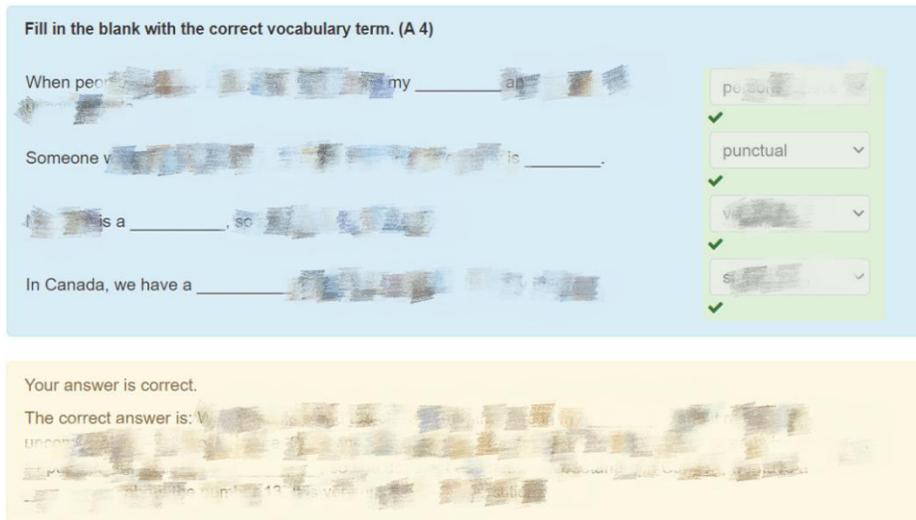
Figure 7. A vocabulary task with feedback from an ESLCO unit test.

Figure 8. A writing task with answers and scores from an ESLCO unit test.

enough practice opportunities as formative assignments and clearer guidelines communicated to students and parents at the beginning of the course. Its alignment with CLT and TBLT principles, combined with its emphasis on real-life language application, ensures that students are prepared for the demands of Ontario's education system. With its construct focused on pivotal language skills, systematic and sophisticated design, standardized and reliable scoring and validity ensured through continuous evaluation and alignment with recognized competency standards, a clear pathway is provided to students for improving their language learning outcomes.

The assessment, evaluation and reporting of online ESL assessment of OSSD are valid, fair, transparent and equitable for all students. What's more, it demonstrates the full range of students' learning and it emphasizes

on their self-assessment skills which could stimulate students' academic performance, self-regulated learning and self-efficacy.

However, there are still areas for improvement. For example:

(1) Providing more grading teachers for one course: At present, there is only one grading teacher for each student in each course. It's better to arrange more grading teachers in multiple sessions in one course to reduce the subjectivity of the scoring and enhance the reliability;

(2) Addressing scoring challenges: Ongoing training and calibration sessions for classroom teachers and grading teachers can help ensure consistency and fairness in scoring;

This comprehensive review offers a detailed analysis of the online ESL assessment's construct, design, scoring, and validity, providing insights into its advantages and areas for improvement. By addressing these aspects mentioned above, the ESL assessment can continue to support the academic and personal growth of English language learners as a valuable tool in the OSSD system.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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