

Using High-Interest, High-Level Remediation Programming with At-Risk OSSLT Writers

Completed by:

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Essential Question:

Will grade ten applied-level students who, through diagnostic evidence are at-risk of being unsuccessful on the OSSLT, be successful following remediation lessons on necessary literacy skills that feature high-interest, high-level content?

Background:

In the book *Adolescent Literacy: Turning Promise into Practice*, Yvette Jackson and Eric J. Cooper define literacy to include “[fostering] engagement of behaviors vital to adolescents... [incorporating] authentic literacy—literacy relevant to students... and [recognizing] the critical role of a student’s frame of reference in literacy development” (248). The Ajax High School Literacy Committee felt that the last two elements of this definition were prerequisites in achieving the first.

Moreover, we believed it to be essential that these instructional tools also be high-level reading, at least on par with the level of difficulty found on the OSSLT. To again quote Jackson and Cooper, “Dumbing down the curriculum is not now, has not been, and will never be the answer for helping underachieving students catch up, keep up, and move ahead” (247).

Ajax High School students who have been unsuccessful in writing the OSSLT have typically had difficulties in two key areas with respect to their reading: awareness of textuality and understanding implicitly stated information and ideas. We attributed these failings to the fact that these students are struggle both with the content of a text as well as its form.

With regard to their OSSLT-related writing, our at-risk students had difficulties both with the structure of their pieces (i.e. written conventions) as well as writing enough to meet the expectations

of the test. We felt here that students' performance was adversely affected by disinterest in the material presented in the prompts coupled with an unwillingness to pursue the writing process (pre-writing, especially) to its natural conclusion.

We felt that by removing the stumbling block posed by content that is either unfamiliar or uninteresting to these at-risk students, we could improve their understanding of textuality and awareness of implicit information. In addition, we felt that we could make inroads in teaching these students writing processes and strategies if they were more inclined to study the accompanying prompts and written pieces. Last, we believed that as our students build their competence and confidence in these areas, they would then be able to transfer these skills to engage all new texts, particularly those found on the OSSLT.

Data Collection Methods and Analysis:

The following timelines were followed in order to implement the program and gather data for analysis:

October 2008 to November 2008

The Literacy Committee designed four diagnostic tests to present to all ENG 2P1, ENG 2PS, ENG 2L1 students. The diagnostic material was closely modeled after OSSLT activities.

December 2008 to February 2009

All applied grade ten English students wrote the four diagnostics tests in their regular English classes. Multiple choice questions were marked in-class while all written material was evaluated by the literacy committee using rubrics derived from the *Released 2008 EQAO Item-Specific Rubric and Sample Student Responses with Annotations*.

With these results, the project coordinators identified students we deemed to be at-risk of being unsuccessful on the OSSLT. Failing any two of the diagnostic activities earned this status and was one criterion we addressed. In addition, a failing result on the major writing task, regardless of the students' performance on the other tasks, would trigger an at-risk label.

February 2009

All at-risk students were recruited to attend an after-school literacy program through direct contact with their parents or guardians by members of the Literacy Committee.

March 2009

A ten-hour after-school literacy program was delivered to the at-risk students by three members of the literacy committee. The activities within the individual lessons were modeled after OSSLT components and featured high-interest, high-level content; most of the material was culled from *The Globe and Mail* and similar publications.

Two activities were created for each component. In the first, students worked with minimal teacher intervention. After each of the first tasks, students engaged in self- and peer-assessment. For the second activity, intensive teacher modeling and guidance was provided to address the deficiencies identified in the first activity and to give them strategies to remedy these problems in future assessments. Students self- and peer-assessed their work to measure their improvement.

April 2009

Initial work on writing the MISA report commenced.

May 2009

Using the download from the EQAO, we compiled data regarding pass-fail rates of the students in our project as well as all of our OSSLT writers.

May to June 2009

The MISA team finished the report to MISA.

Results and Findings:

Table One – Ajax High School Literacy Test Results, Overall

	March 2008	April 2009	Change
Fully Participating Students	361	354	-7
Successful First Time Eligible Students	284	297	+13
Percentage of Successful First Time Eligible Students	79%	84%	+5%

Table Two – Ajax High School Literacy Test Results, Applied Students

	March 2008	April 2009	Change
Fully Participating Students	138	114	-24
Successful First Time Eligible Students	77	77	0
Percentage of Successful First Time Eligible Students	56%	68%	+12%

Table Three – At-risk student based on diagnostic results

Number of Students Writing the Diagnostics	Number Deemed At-Risk	Percentage of Students At-Risk	Number Enrolling in the ASLC	At-Risk Students in the ASLC
92	55	60%	33	60%

Table Four – After-School Literacy Course Students' OSSLT Performance

ASLC Students	Successful OSSLT Writers	Success Rate
33	21	64%

Reflection on the Data

We were very pleased with our performance on the 2009 OSSLT, especially when compared with the previous year. The percentage of successful overall first time eligible students rose by 5% to 84% this year. Even more satisfying were the improvements on with our applied-level writers. This year, we saw an increase of 12% in the success rate of these students to 68% overall. We attribute this latter improvement in no small part to the success of our MISA project and our work with at-risk, applied-level writers.

ASLC Findings

The students enrolled in the ASLC, even with an at-risk label, demonstrated a wide range of skills. That being said, we found that there were several traits common to many of the students:

- Intimidated by the prospect of writing the test
- Minimal ability to plan writing, especially for longer responses (news article, opinion piece)
- Tendency to rush through answers giving only the briefest responses
- Minimal understanding of the OSSLT evaluation criteria

The use of high-interest, high-level course content, we feel, successfully addressed all of these issues.

Test Intimidation

The material we used for the diagnostic material and ASLC course content was largely culled from the *Globe and Mail* or other similarly reputable news agencies. In using this content, students were faced with material that is, in fact, more challenging than what they would encounter on the OSSLT. At the end of the ASLC when we used last year's OSSLT (available through the EQAO website), students were much more comfortable with the prospect of writing the OSSLT than they otherwise might have been. In an exit survey, one of our students wrote "the test is not that hard." Another wrote the best part of the program was "learning that this test is easier [than] I thought."

Minimal Planning Ability

Building students' prewriting abilities was no small task. Teaching students planning and preparation techniques cannot occur in a vacuum; they have to have material to fill into graphic organizers or planning sheets. The ASLC students' ability to brainstorm and develop ideas was badly underdeveloped. The use of high-level content was useful in that the density of the works provided ample resources from which to draw ideas. Using material that was of interest to them was critical in encouraging them to persist in their prewriting activities when they otherwise would have given up. Additionally, students could often relate personally with their study materials. Thus, while they may not have been able to find evidence within what they had read, they could supplement their initial work with personal examples or experiences.

Brevity of Responses

This problem is intimately linked to the previous one. The central issue here is that the ASLC students had minimal awareness regarding the conventions for their written responses. This issue dovetailed into another, however. Even after students were taught what was expected from them for each of the question types, many felt they were unable to write enough to meet these expectations, that they weren't smart enough to produce enough content. Here, their engagement in the material was key, "while adolescents are developing the adult capacity to be motivated by extrinsic interests... most require significant intrinsic interest in materials in order to persist in difficult tasks" (Learning Point).

Indeed, the confidence and comfort the students demonstrated as they progressed through the ASLC was highly encouraging. In an exit survey, one student wrote that the best part of the program was "having people help me, and they knew what I was struggling with and they helped." This same student concluded "I'm smarter [than] I thought I was." While we started the ASLC with very reluctant readers and writers, we ended with a much more confident and competent group.

Minimal Understanding of OSSLT Evaluation Criteria

While the previous three characteristics of the ASLC participants are fairly called student failings, this is a problem that rests solely with the EQAO. The difference in the everyday evaluation practice that our students experience with that of the OSSLT should not be underestimated. Whereas students are trained to use rubrics for longer tasks or look to see how many marks each question is worth on a test, there are no such guidelines to be found on the OSSLT; instead, students are left merely with a slate of empty lines with the instruction to fill them.

In having the students write each task twice, we were able to give the students an unguided exposure to the test akin to writing the OSSLT followed by a run-through with much greater teacher intervention. The practice of self- and peer assessment where students used the OSSLT rubrics was critical in having them internalize the evaluation criteria.

The importance of high-interest material in this area is critical. The ASLC group was populated by many of the most reluctant students in the school; asking them to spend an extra 70 minutes in class after their school day had ended and work on material that was not appealing to them would have been insufferable. Our retention of students who started the ASLC is something we attribute, in no small part, to the content delivered in the program. This finding affirms the premise that “educators must work to build engagement levels if they hope to support students in meeting higher standards” (Learning Point).

Table Five – At-Risk But Non-ASLC Students’ OSSLT Success

At-Risk, Non-ASLC Students	Successful OSSLT Writers	Success Rate
22	17	77%

Table Six – ASLC Students’ Performance in Grade Nine English

ASLC Students	Students Who Failed ENG 1P1 or ENG 1D1	Failure Rate
33	17	52%

Table Seven – Grade Ten Applied Classroom Teachers’ Predictions of OSSLT Success

Section	Number of Writers	Successful Writers	Success Rate	Teacher Accuracy
ENG 2P1-10	11	8	73%	82%
ENG 2P1-40	9	8	89%	67%
ENG 2PS-50	11	5	45%	
ENG 2P1-51	12	10	83%	83%
ENG 2P1-52	9	7	78%	56%
ENG 2P1-60	13	9	69%	62%
ENG 2P1-70	14	10	71%	86%
ENG 2P1-80	13	9	69%	85%

Table Eight – Unsuccessful ENG 2P1 OSSLT Writers’ Grade 9 EQAO Math Results

Total Unsuccessful	Level R	Level One	Level Two	Level Three	Level Four
37	15	8	12	2	0

Figure One – Unsuccessful ENG 2P1 OSSLT Writers’ Grade Nine EQAO Math Test Results, n=37

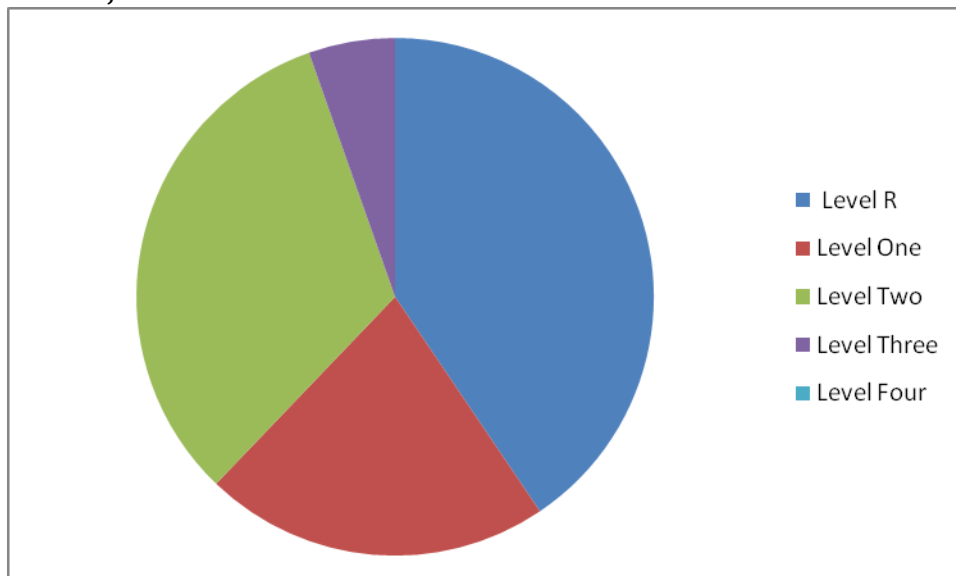
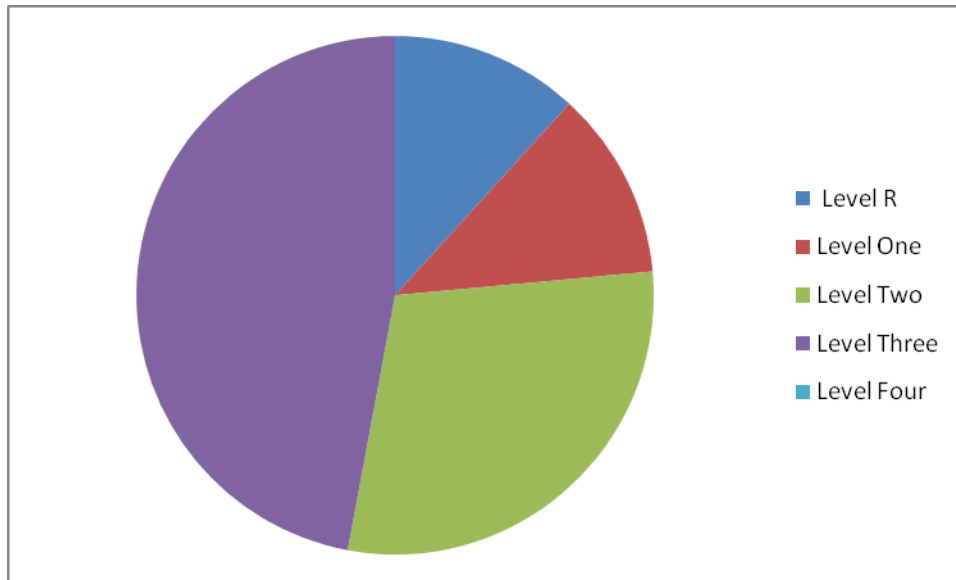


Table Nine – At-Risk Non-ASLC Successful OSSLT Writers’ Grade 9 EQAO Math Results

Total Successful	Level R	Level One	Level Two	Level Three	Level Four
17	2	2	5	8	0

Figure Two – At-Risk Non-ASLC Successful OSSLT Writers’ Grade 9 EQAO Math Results, n=17



Who is an At-Risk Student?

This question proved to be the white whale of our MISA project. We were initially very confident with the results generated by our diagnostic testing. We fully expected to be able to report that the 64% OSSLT success rate of students enrolled in the ASLC would dwarf the performance of the students we identified as being at-risk who chose not to participate in our program. Our unofficial “control group” shattered this plan, however, when 77% of these students passed the OSSLT.

Rationalizing the performance of this group of 22 “at-risk” students was challenging. The literature does, however, offer some help. First comes a self-evident observation: “at-risk readers do not value reading in the same way their teachers do” (Hunt). To this we would add that perfectly capable students often “do not value reading in the same way their teachers do” and can therefore appear to be at-risk if they do not attach value to the diagnostic tests put in front of them. Indeed, “adolescent learners sometimes experience a world of rules and regulations imposed on them by adults who seem to not understand their world” (Learning Point).

Working on the premise that our work in the ASLC had not, in fact, impaired our students’ ability to perform on the OSSLT, the task of identifying better at-risk indicators became pressing. To that end, we had all of the ENG 2P1 teachers predict which of their students would be successful on the OSSLT. Results here were not altogether satisfying; the most accurate teacher was correct on 86% of his predictions but the least accurate was a full 30% below that number at 56%.

Looking at the failure rates of at-risk students did not yield convincing results either. Among the 33 ASLC students, 52% had failed their ENG 1P1 or ENG 1D1 course. The correlation here is compelling, but by no means the only useful indicator.

The strongest indicator by far came from an unexpected source: the EQAO's Grade 9 Assessment of Mathematics. Of the 37 ENG 2P1 students who were unsuccessful on the OSSLT, only two scored a level three (with no level four students at all) on the math test. Of these students then, 95% scored level two or below. Conversely, when looking at the performance of our "at-risk" non-ASLC students, 47% of these students achieved a level three on the Grade 9 Assessment of Mathematics. Indeed, this test yielded unquestionably compelling data.

The results here stand to reason. The two tests are written and evaluated in a similar fashion. Successful performance on the math test requires strong literacy skills, either in reading and interpreting questions or writing responses in communication categories. The real power of the EQAO math test for these purposes is as an indicator of the students' legitimate academic abilities. While students may give a mediocre effort on diagnostic testing (or be absent from altogether), the seriousness with which they view a major summative assessment is likely to garner an effort that is a truer measure of their abilities as well as be a formidable indicator for the Literacy Committee of a student's likelihood of being unsuccessful on the OSSLT.

Reflections and Action:

The assessment of at-risk students will certainly be affected by the results of our MISA project. We will now use multiple indicators, beginning with students' performance on the Grade 9 Assessment of Mathematics from the EQAO. We will also consider, however, students' performance on diagnostic testing, recommendations from grade nine and ten English teachers, and credit accumulation data. With the math test data available early in the new school year, we plan on beginning our at-risk labeling process much sooner so as to enable earlier intervention with our at-risk students.

Additionally, we will build more of the high-interest, high-level literacy material into our grade nine and ten applied core subjects, beginning with English and branching outward. We will also encourage our family of schools to implement similar strategies in their intermediate panels' teaching practices. It is our hope that early, high-yield, cross-curricular literacy training will reduce the number of at-risk students who need specific intervention in their grade ten year.

As the unexpected link between the grade nine, EQAO math test and OSSLT performance showed, students with low literacy skills are at risk of suffering any potential number of adverse academic and social outcomes stemming from this weakness. Any interventions that mitigate these adverse outcomes serve the pragmatic and ethical good and should be zealously implemented.

Suggestions for Future Research:

- What other data might effectively predict at-risk status for students (Grades 3 & 6 EQAO testing, attendance, etc.)?
- Can similar improvements be achieved with other likely at-risk, non-applied students, particularly locally developed, English language learners, etc.
- Can the approach of high-interest, high-level material improve student performance in areas other than literacy?