

Insights from the PELA Symposium at Curtin University

The PELA symposium that was held in Curtin University, Perth, Western Australia on 15 February 2017 and was funded by the Association for Academic Language and Learning (AALL) was informative for two reasons: (1) that PELA in many Australian universities is largely a *general English writing* test (70% in 2011, n = 37; and 78% in 2017, n = 33), and (2) that PELA is increasingly being done in many universities in Australia (62% in 2011; 70% in 2017). Although listening and speaking are integral components in language assessments, these components are rarely utilised in many PELAs in Australian universities (listening = 30% in 2011, 13% in 2017; speaking = 9% in 2011, 4% in 2017) because they are expensive to assess considering the need for a software developer and a laboratory. Also, if conducted by academic language and learning (ALL) staff or learning advisors (LAs), these entail higher logistics and staffing support vis-a-vis a compressed study period and students' perceived non-compliance.

It is worth noting that PELA's compulsory component has dropped significantly from 83% in 2011 to 52% in 2017 (AALL, 2017). The reasons are varied, however, one key argument arose: that some colleges in Australian universities see an ambivalent function of PELA for specific student cohorts, e.g., engineering or pharmacy (AALL, 2017). Nevertheless, the implementation of PELA is still being largely supported in theory and practice by the symposium speakers, Prof. John Read of the University of Auckland and Dr. Ute Knoch of the University of Melbourne, and other language experts who attended the symposium because of its 'diagnostic' element: that PELA has the ability to predict students' language competency or literacy. They posited, however, that further discussions must be made between academic staff and ALL staff or LAs (those who conduct the PELA and evaluate results) in any university setting so that an effective PELA can be more tailored to the unique language and/or literacy needs of students.

Some components that can serve as foci for discussions may not only be about the characteristics of PELA test, scoring and administration, as well as reliability of results across test forms and administration, but also on the relevance of PELA to specific academic domains, appropriacy of decisions and beneficial consequences (Knoch, 2017; Knoch, 2013). The speakers argued further that the PELA test, which can vary from institution to institution, may not be problematic as viewed by many, rather, the problem may arise from a lack of institutional policy support, implementation and follow up. A PELA that is compulsory but is *not enforced* may not be able to fully reach its aim as it may not catch students with serious language deficiencies. As a matter of fact, a number of students in many universities can do away with PELA without facing consequences. Also, a lack of logistics, staffing support and institutional policy hampers both the implementation and evaluation of PELA and monitoring of students' academic performance.

PELA in James Cook University Singapore

PELA in JCU Singapore, as in many other Australian universities, is mainly a general writing task, *not* an academic writing task. The students are asked to write a paragraph in response to a general writing prompt (a memorable event in their lives). The goal is to assess their current knowledge on grammar, punctuation, language use and organisation of ideas. The students are asked to write a minimum of 5 sentences to a maximum of 10 or one paragraph. Detailed instructions, assessment rubrics and scoring bands are provided before students undertake the PELA. The PELA in JCU Singapore, being compulsory, is *enforced* considering two schedules of test administration: (1) during the reporting period (first phase) which is administered by the Admissions team, and (2) in week 1 of the study period in 4 major classes taking general subjects (PY1101, BU1104/BU1804, LB5205 and CP1401) (catching phase) which is administered by Learning Support. The main goal of the PELA is to find where the students currently are in terms of their academic language knowledge.

The students are scored according to bands: *band 1* means that the students exceed expectations (proficient), *band 2* means that they meet expectations (borderline) and *band 3* means that the students are approaching expectations (at-risk). Those who fall under the band 3 category are encouraged to attend English language workshops that Learning Support runs, with the aim to help them gain and develop necessary language skills for them to perform better in their subjects. However, this form of language intervention seems to fall under the ‘weak adjunct model’ (Read, 2017) because the language intervention is generic (not tailored to a specific subject’s writing assignments) nor is embedded in a particular subject that requires particular academic literacy skills necessary for success in the subjects. Also, students are not compelled to attend the workshops and meet specific workshop hours due to curriculum-related issues, e.g., the workshops are not integrated into the students’ study timetable that offer a Pass/Fail scoring metrics. Lastly, students are only *encouraged* to undertake an elective, i.e., CU1000 or English for Academic Purposes (EAP), *not mandated*. The aim of this elective is for students to develop and practise the language skills and strategies necessary to write university essays by “understanding the characteristics, style and grammar of academic writing, analysing essay topics, developing planning strategies, structuring an essay, referencing and avoiding plagiarism” (JCU Australia, 2011).

PELA Data (2015 - 2017)

Data from Qualtrics reveal that those who perform poorly in the PELA are predominantly from the BBus program followed by the Foundation program (see Table 1). Data from SP52 2015 and back are excluded in the table in concordance to one criterion in the administration and implementation of the PELA: that students’ information should be destroyed within 2 years.

Table 1. PELA Data: 2017 (SP51), 2016 (SP51-53) and 2015 (SP53)

Degree	2017 (SP51)			2016 (SP51-SP53)			2015 (SP53)		
	Band 1	Band 2	Band 3	Band 1	Band 2	Band 3	Band 1	Band 2	Band 3
BA	1.10%	0.36%	0.36%	0.40%	0.61%	0.10%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
BBus	7.01%	9.96%	11.43%	9.48%	16%	7.24%	4.02%	24.90%	11.72%
BBusEnvSci	1.47%	0.73%	0.36%	0.81%	1.93%	1.22%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
BEd-ECE	2.21%	0.36%	0.00%	0.71%	0.61%	0.20%	0.73%	0.36%	0.00%
BIT	0.73%	0.36%	0.73%	1.93%	3.36%	2.34%	0.73%	4.39%	2.19%
BPsych	10.70%	2.21%	1.84%	8.46%	5.20%	0.91%	7.69%	11.35%	1.83%
DipHE	1.10%	2.58%	5.90%	0.91%	2.85%	1.83%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
GradCert/Dip	0.36%	0.00%	0.00%	0.10%	0.40%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
MBA	2.95%	0.36%	1.10%	2.14%	2.04%	1.53%	0.00%	0.00%	1.46%
MIT	0.36%	1.84%	0.36%	0.40%	0.91%	0.71%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
MIntlTourHospMgt	0.00%	0.00%	0.73%	0.00%	0.30%	0.20%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
MIntlTourHospMgt/MBA	0.00%	0.00%	0.36%	0.00%	0.30%	0.20%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
MPA	0.00%	0.00%	0.36%	0.30%	0.30%	0.20%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
MIT-MBA	0.00%	0.36%	0.00%	0.20%	0.20%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
MPA-MBA	0.00%	0.73%	0.00%	0.20%	0.40%	0.20%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
Foundation	6.27%	6.64%	5.90%	0.91%	4.80%	2.75%	1.83%	6.95%	4.02%
Study Abroad	5.16%	2.95%	0.36%	3.06%	0.81%	0.51%	0.00%	0.00%	0.36%
Other (ELPP)	0.00%	0.00%	0.73%	0.10%	0.40%	1.73%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
Total Number of Takers	271			980			273		

Source: Qualtrics / Band 1 (Proficient); Band 2 (Borderline); Band 3 (Fail)

Recommendation: An Argumentative PELA for BBus and Foundation

Since the data in Table 1 indicate that a huge cohort in the BBus and Foundation programs are perceived to struggle in their subjects (BBus having the highest Band 3 percentages from 2015 to 2017 followed by Foundation), an argumentative PELA that is tailored to these cohorts may be useful for two reasons: (1) to get a glimpse of their English language knowledge, and (2) to determine their

English language literacy or competency by gauging their argumentative and analytical skills (through a short essay test that asks them to make a stand or opinion based on a given topic and justify it). This argumentative PELA will also help in designing English language interventions so that those who perform badly in the PELA will get an opportunity to improve *both* their English language knowledge and English language literacy skills necessary to achieve success in their subjects.

The other cohorts, namely Psychology, Education and MBA, who have been performing well in the generic PELA as shown in Table 1 will be excluded in this new argumentative PELA including the possible in-lecture or within-tutorial English literacy workshops (as interventions). Also, although the IT cohort has a significant number of Band 3 students (2.19% in 2015 and 2.34% in 2016), these students will be exempted from doing the PELA because they do more technical writing than argumentative writing (Personal communication with Dr Yok Yen, 2017). However, these cohorts can avail of the generic workshops that Learning Support conducts, as well as other services that Learning Support offers: <https://www.jcu.edu.sg/student-life/student-support-services/learning-support>

This argumentative PELA for the BBus and Foundation cohorts has the following characteristics:

- is created based on a consensus among lecturers teaching generic subjects in the BBus and Foundation programs particularly those teaching first year, first term students;
- targets not only the English language knowledge but also the English language literacies or competencies required in the generic BBus and Foundation subjects, *specifically making an argument based on a particular topic/question and defending this argument*;
- is a single instrument (diagnostic) using standardised assessment rubrics for an argumentative essay;
- is administered online through Qualtrics; is take-one only and time-bound; entails 1-rater assessment;
- is compulsory to students with overall IELTS score below 7.5 or its equivalent, but optional to students with 8.0 IELTS score or higher;
- assessment criteria include: introduction/conclusion; main argument/refutation; organisation; range of content and vocabulary; and grammar, syntax and mechanics (adapted from Yale-Macmillan argumentative essay rubrics and ELPP Level 3 essay rubrics);
- follows a band scoring: band 1 (proficient), band 2 (borderline) and band 3 (at-risk),
- requires 1 compulsory elective as recommended by the specific faculty, i.e., CU1000 for band 3 students (optional for band 2);
- requires specific English literacy skills intervention in a form of workshops.

An argumentative PELA for BBus and Foundation is attached in this report (see Appendix A). The respective first year experience (FYE) faculty of the BBus program (Dr. Caroline Wong and Dr. Pengji Wang), together with the head of Foundation program (Ms. Gandhimathi Sundrum) and a representative from Learning Support (Mr. Nimrod Delante), convened, discussed and constructed an argumentative PELA in April 2017 for their student cohorts. Included in the discussion were the (1) administration of the said argumentative PELA and (2) assessment. Assessing the PELA is done either by Mr. Nimrod Delante or Dr. George Jacobs of Learning Support. The head of the ELPP department, Mr. Rodney Gillett, graciously shared an existing argumentative essay rubric for ELPP 3 created by Mr Trevor Carty. This, along with the existing essay rubric by the Yale-MacMillan Centre have been modified to be used in marking the argumentative PELA. Approval of this proposed argumentative PELA by the academic compliance committee (ACC) means that the administration of the generic PELA to all first year, first term undergraduate and graduate students will be stopped. Pending approval, this argumentative PELA targeted at BBus and Foundation cohorts is scheduled for trial in SP52 2017 (See Appendix A for more details). Considering the timeframe needed for the discussion and creation of the argumentative PELA, in SP51 2017, first year, first term students took the existing generic PELA as described above. No changes were made on the generic PELA. Similar test administration and assessment measures were employed. Results were sent to specific academic heads and FYE faculty in all four disciplines: Psychology, Business, IT and MBA.

References

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Appendix A
Argumentative PELA for BBus and Foundation

Directions: Select ONLY ONE topic and create an argument or stand based on this topic. Defend or justify your argument or stand. Write in 200-250 words (2-3 paragraphs). You have 30 minutes to complete this essay.

1. Is man responsible for climate change?
2. Should cigarette smoking be banned in colleges and universities?
3. Is paper qualification the only means to success?
4. Are we becoming too dependent on technology?
5. Technology is both an enabler of things as well as a distraction for many people. What is your stand?
6. Should exercise be part of the school curriculum?
7. Should 'fast food' be banned?
8. Universities exist because of students who are the main customers of universities. What is your view?
9. Learning can take place both within and outside the university. Do you agree?
10. Is e-commerce (online shopping) good or bad?

You will be marked based on these assessment criteria:

	Band 1	Band 2	Band 3	Score
A. Introduction	Well-developed introductory paragraph contains detailed background, a clear explanation or definition of the problem, and a thesis statement	Introductory paragraph contains some background information and states the problem, but does not explain using details; states the thesis of the paper.	Thesis and/or problem is vague or unclear. Background details are a seemingly random collection of information, unclear, or not related to the topic.	
Conclusion	Conclusion summarises the main topic without repeating previous sentences; writer's opinions and suggestions for change are logical and well thought out.	Conclusion summarises main topics. Some suggestions for change are evident.	Conclusion does not adequately summarise the main points. No suggestions for change or opinions are included.	
B. Main Argument	The main argument is well developed with supporting details.	Argument is present but lacks details and development.	No main argument is given or, if there is, the argument is vague, with poor development of ideas.	
Refutation	Refutation paragraph acknowledges the opposing view and summarises the main points.	Refutation paragraph acknowledges the opposing view but doesn't summarise points.	Refutation missing or vague.	
C. Organisation	Logical, compelling progression of ideas in clear structure which enhances and highlights the central idea or theme and moves the reader through the text; organization flows so smoothly the reader hardly thinks about it; effective, mature, graceful transitions exist throughout the essay.	Overall, the paper is logically developed; progression of ideas makes sense and moves the reader through the text; transitions exist throughout and add to the essay's coherence.	Arrangement of essay is unclear and illogical; the writing lacks a clear sense of direction; ideas, details or events seem strung together in a loose or random fashion; there is no identifiable internal structure and readers have trouble following the writer's line of thought; a few forced transitions in the essay or no transitions are present.	
D. Range of Content and Vocabulary	Very accurate reflection of the essay question asked; competent & logical discussion of most aspects of the topic with appropriate linking words for cohesion; generally original in style and a good range of academic vocabulary; ideas and opinions are well thought out.	Satisfactory reflection of topic asked; somewhat competent and logical discussion of some points with some appropriate linking words for cohesion; somewhat original in style with some use of academic vocabulary; some ideas and opinions moderately well	Poor reflection of essay question asked; generally irrelevant and illogical discussion of the topic and a lack of linking words for cohesion; not much originality in style shown with a lack of academic vocabulary; very few opinions or ideas, if any, are well thought out.	

<p>E. Grammar, Syntax and Mechanics</p>	<p>Very formal grammatical structure with sentence variety following correct subject-verb agreement rules; mostly complete sentences which do not begin with ‘and’, ‘but’ and ‘because’. Almost no run-on sentences, abbreviations and contractions; punctuation and capitalisation are correct.</p>	<p>thought out. Formal grammatical structure is satisfactory with generally complete sentences which do not begin with ‘and’, ‘but’ and ‘because’ but with some awkward sentences; few run-on sentences, abbreviations and contractions; few errors on punctuation and capitalisation appear.</p>	<p>Formal grammatical structure is unsatisfactory; too many incomplete and incorrect sentences; many run-on sentences, abbreviations and contractions; many errors on punctuation and capitalisation.</p>	
Overall Score				

Note. Adapted from the Yale-MacMillan Centre (n. d.) argumentative essay rubrics and James Cook University Singapore ELPP (2017) Level 3 essay rubrics.

Scoring Descriptions:

_____ **Band 1 (Proficient):** You appear to have adequate competence in written language. You are at **low risk** of failure due to academic writing literacy.

_____ **Band 2 (Borderline):** You will benefit from focused help with written language to be more successful in your subjects. You are at **possible risk** of failure due to academic writing literacy.

_____ **Band 3 (Fail):** You do not appear to have the level of competence in written language that is required for success in your subjects. You need immediate assistance in written language to avoid failure in future subjects. You are at **high risk** of failure due to academic writing literacy.