

The Post-Entry Skills Survey (PESS) and Post-Entry English Language Assessment (PELA)
at JCU Singapore

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WHAT IS PESS?

The Post-Entry Skills Survey (PESS) is an online survey that serves as a tool to determine the learning and/or study skills of both commencing undergraduate and graduate students of James Cook University Singapore (JCU Singapore). This survey is divided into three parts: (1) Part I tracks demographics for both undergraduate and graduate students, (2) Part II asks for their technology skills and learning or study skills, and (3) Part III, the Post-Entry English Language Assessment (PELA) section, is where students are asked to write a paragraph on a given topic. It has to be noted that the focus of the PELA is on students' current English writing skills. Prior to doing the writing task, the students are provided with the assessment criteria and scoring rubrics. More about the PELA is discussed in the next sections of this paper.

Overall, the PESS creates a database of students' technological skills as well as learning and/or study skills along with a PELA that provides an overview of students' English writing abilities. This database will help both the learning advisors and the academic staff of JCU Singapore to identify students who are at possible and high risk of failure in their subjects, specifically in performing written assignments. This will further help the learning advisors and the academic staff create and develop effective strategies to help these students meet academic challenges and succeed in their studies and beyond.

WHAT IS PELA?

PELA stands for Post-Entry English Language Assessment. It is a diagnostic tool that is used to measure students' current English writing skills that are necessary to achieve success in their subjects. It is a writing prompt that allows students to showcase their academic writing competence through writing a paragraph with a minimum of 5 sentences and a maximum of 10 sentences. Before they attempt to write, students are provided with the assessment criteria, i.e., how they are supposed to write the paragraph. They are instructed to develop a topic sentence, support it with details such as examples, and end with a clincher or concluding sentence. Scoring rubrics are also provided for them showing how their paragraphs will be marked and scored. Table 1 and Table 2 show these assessment criteria and scoring rubrics.

Table 1. Assessment Criteria for the PELA

Criteria	Description
Paragraph Structure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Start your paragraph with a topic sentence. Topic sentences tell readers what the paragraph will talk about. • The sentences after the topic sentence provide ideas and information to support the topic sentence. You do not need to provide references. • Use some connectors between sentences, such as ‘First’, ‘However’, ‘As a result’, and ‘In conclusion’. Connectors enhance ease and flow of your ideas. • End your paragraph with a concluding sentence. Concluding sentences summarise paragraphs and may also provide suggestions for using the information in the paragraph or predictions about the future.
Use of Academic Language	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No informal language, for example, avoid ‘lots of’ and ‘gotta/gonna’. • Use complete words. No contractions (for example, ‘isn’t’) and no abbreviations (for example, ‘MRT’) unless spelled out the first time these abbreviations appear in-text. • Avoid absolute words, such as ‘always’ and ‘no one’.
Use of Academic Writing Style	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be precise (Avoid unnecessary words). • Be logical (Ask yourself if your ideas fit together or make sense).
Editing the Paragraph	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Check your grammar (verbs should agree with the subjects of the sentences; check whether you are using the articles (a, an, the) and prepositions (in, on, of) correctly). • Check your punctuations (capital letters, full stops, commas, and spaces). • Check your tense and learn to shift tense when needed.

PELA scoring falls into three bands: Band 1 (Exceeds Expectations or Pass), Band 2 (Meets Expectations or Borderline) and Band 3 (Approaches Expectations or Fail). Table 2 presents the descriptions of each band followed by the PELA topic or question (see Table 3).

Table 2. Overall PELA Scoring

Band 1	Exceeds Expectations - <i>Pass</i>	Students appear to have adequate competence in written language. Students at low risk of failure due to written language or literacy.
Band 2	Meets Expectations - <i>Borderline</i>	Students require some focused help in written language to be successful in their subjects. Students at possible risk of failure due to written language or literacy.
Band 3	Approaches Expectations - <i>Fail</i>	Students do not appear to have the level of competence in written language that is required for success in their subjects. Students at high risk of failure due to written language or literacy.

Note. Table 1 and Table 2 adapted from JCU Australia’s PELA for Business students.

Table 3. PELA Topic with Guide Questions

Topic	Guide Questions
<p>Please write one paragraph (minimum of 5 sentences; maximum of 10 sentences) on the topic:</p> <p><i>Describe a meaningful experience (e.g., an event, encounter, participation, volunteer activity, adventure, discovery, exposure to or exploration of something) you have had. To elaborate, use one or more guide questions provided for you.</i></p>	<p>a. What was that experience and what makes it meaningful to you?</p> <p>b. Who else were involved in this experience and what influence did they have on you as a person?</p> <p>c. Did this experience help you in terms of understanding your roles and responsibilities as an individual? In what way?</p> <p>d. How will this experience impact your life as a student at JCU Singapore?</p>

Note. Guide questions are aimed to give students insight/input to encourage writing.

BACKGROUND TO THE PELA

James Cook University's English Language and Numeracy Policy (JCUA, 2012) states that, "JCU has a responsibility to ensure that all students develop key graduate attributes including a level of English language and numeracy proficiency that will allow them to participate effectively and productively in their courses and subsequent employment" (n. p.), and that, "The University provides a supportive social and academic environment which promotes students' language and numeracy development" (n. p.) necessary to meet academic demands in particular and real-world/industry tasks in general. One such procedure in promoting language development is the use of a diagnostic tool to identify students' academic language needs early in their candidature so that decisions can be made with the goal to support or scaffold students' learning. One of these diagnostic tools is the PELA.

WHY HAS THE PELA BEEN INTRODUCED AT JCU SINGAPORE?

Although academic success is not solely determined by language proficiency, it is generally observed in most university settings that students who fall below the language threshold (e.g., those who struggle in using English for academic purposes perhaps because their first language is not English) may experience troubles, challenges and frustrations in managing their studies and in trying to transform themselves into autonomous, self-regulated learners

(Lesaux, 2012; Todd, Stinson & Sivakumaran, 2011; Wang, 2016). The learning experiences of these students with inadequate English language proficiency have been cited as a pressing issue by a lot of universities as it affects their ability to succeed academically (Sherry, Thomas & Chui, 2010; Smith & Khawaja, 2011). Research has indicated that language proficiency influences students' cognitive efforts in engaging with academic activities such as writing, personal development and the acculturation process (Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Zhao, Kuh & Carini, 2005).

At JCU Singapore, about 70% of students are coming from non-English speaking backgrounds or NESB (JCU Cognos data, 2015) and this brings a challenge in terms of having students meet academic writing requirements stipulated in their subject guides. Research show that inadequate English language skills that most NESB students are concerned of can put them at risk due to lack of motivation, disappointment and disjointed focus triggered by daunting academic demands leading to “delayed submission of assignments, non-completion, failure and other forms of obstacles throughout their candidature” (JCUA Graduate Research School, [GRS], 2012, n. p.).

Even the Association for Academic and Language Learning (AALL, 2008) in Australia has widely acknowledged that many students across the Australian tertiary education sector are, to a large extent, unprepared for academic writing demands despite the fact that English is their native language. This is evidenced by difficulties in meeting academic threshold criteria such as critical analysis, critical reflection, synthesising ideas and evaluating and judging opinions which are required in most academic writing assignments (e.g., essays, literature reviews and reflection essays) and in communicating effectively in oral presentations such as poster presentations and business proposal presentations (JCU GRS, 2012).

The number of higher education institutions implementing PELA has increased exponentially since early 2000 (Harris, 2013). This uptake has been driven largely by the good practice principles of the TEQSA Act of 2011 and TEQSA's quality assessment on English language proficiency (Tynan & Johns, 2015; Harris, 2013; TEQSA, 2013). Studies show that PELA is an effective indicator of students' language abilities as they commence university education. From students' perspective, PELA results can help them be more aware and circumspect of their language difficulties, hence, they can take control of their learning (Moore, 2012; Dunworth, 2009). From university's perspective, PELA can be used to identify, early on,

those students at a greater risk of failure due to weak language skills so that they can be directed to available support mechanisms in the university such as learning and/or writing support centres (Murray, 2011). For example, Edith Cowan University in Australia has adopted a university-wide PELA with the dual aims of identifying those who may require support with English language proficiency and providing effective academic writing support where needed (Harris, 2013).

These findings seem to validate the intention of administering the PELA with commencing degree and postgraduate students in JCU Singapore in order to determine where the students are in terms of their current language skills and what can be done to assist those who might exhibit language difficulties as they go through their candidature. Also, these findings address the programme objectives of Australia's Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) Act of 2011 tasked to undertake quality assessment of English Language Proficiency (ELP) amongst Australian universities.

In response to its English Language policy and to TEQSA requirements as well as to the existing English language challenges inherent at JCU Singapore, the PELA has been designed to identify students' potential language problems at an earlier time. More importantly, a proactive and dynamic mechanism has been put in place in response to PELA outcomes with the goal to help at-risk students cope with academic demands and achieve success in their studies. This proactive mechanism comes in many forms to scaffold learning, e.g., weekly workshops, just-in time in-lecture workshops and facilitated peer-tutoring program that learning advisors conduct and manage on a regular basis.

WHO UNDERTAKES THE PESS AND PELA?

Previously, only commencing undergraduate degree students were undertaking the PESS and PELA. As of SP51 2014, both undergraduate and graduate degree students who are commencing first year, first trimester students in JCU Singapore are required to undertake the PESS and PELA.

HOW AND WHEN ARE THE PESS AND PELA ADMINISTERED?

Since 2014, the PESS and PELA have been administered via online means using Qualtrics. Students are asked to go to a tiny URL using their laptops, tablets (e.g., iPad, Samsung Galaxy tab) or smart phones. For the survey questions, students only need to tick boxes. For

the PELA task, students need to write their paragraphs in a given box. The time allotted for writing the PELA paragraph is 30 minutes. The students take the PESS and PELA only once.

If the goal is to catch as many students as possible, the PESS and PELA are administered in two different schedules where student attendance is at a maximum: (1) during the reporting period, and (2) in week 1 of the study period¹ which is the official start of classes. A few marketing staff of the university administer the PESS and PELA during the reporting period since they are those who are in contact with students undergoing admission, enrolment and other logistical procedures such as submitting and filing documents and registering their finger prints in the attendance database of the university. In week 1, the official start of their classes, learning advisors go to four major lecture classes (Psychology – PY1101, Business – BU1104, IT – CP1404 and MBA – LB5205) in order to further catch students who missed the PESS and PELA during the reporting week. It has to be noted that although the PESS and PELA are mandatory for first year, first trimester degree and postgraduate students, the system of administering them still needs to be improved to make it more efficient and the learning support unit is trying to figure out other ways to meet this logistical goal.

WHY ARE THE PESS AND PELA ADMINISTERED AT THE BEGINNING OF THE STUDY PERIOD?

The reasons are:

- a. Based on previous experience, the level of compliance amongst first year, first trimester students in undertaking surveys and other assessments at the beginning of the trimester is higher compared to students undertaking such during the middle of the trimester.
- b. As previously mentioned, the main goal of PESS and PELA is to determine the entry-level learning and/or study skills and language proficiency that students possess as they commence their undergraduate and postgraduate studies in the university. Thus, from a theoretical standpoint, the PESS and PELA are supposed to be administered at the beginning of the study period if the goal is to meet such intention stated above.
- c. Based on previous PELA results, some students who took the PESS and PELA after week 1 of the study period appeared to use flattery and/or praise about their lectures

¹ At JCU Singapore, study period and trimester are one and the same. They are used interchangeably in this paper.

in particular and JCU Singapore in general in their PELA paragraphs. This is in contrast to the PELA paragraphs written by students who took the survey and PELA in week 1 of the study period or during the reporting period, in which, responses could have been different had they taken the PELA after week 1 or so. Therefore, a delay in undertaking the PESS and PELA can affect the way these students' paragraphs are assessed and the way they performed in the writing prompt considering an already added exposure to the lessons and discussions in the first few weeks.

- d. The earlier in a study period that students provide data about their learning and language skills, the earlier that learning advisors and academic staff will be able to identify at-risk students in their respective programs and devise ways to help them. DesJardin, Ambrose and Eisenberg (2009) indicated that early use of facilitative language strategies such as writing assessments can contribute uniquely to the development of the students' literacy skills in the long run. The learning advisors, in coordination with the concerned academic staff, can therefore formulate strategies and devise customised workshops tailored to the needs of at-risk students that have been identified through the PESS and PELA.

HOW ARE PELA RESULTS RECORDED?

Just as administering the PELA is online, so to its scoring and record keeping. Learning advisors will download the PELA paragraphs from Qualtrics, upload them on a shared Google Drive folder through creating Google sheets, and mark them there using the three scoring bands shown in Table 2. After approximately two weeks, students will be informed of their PELA score through email which they have provided for in the PESS. PELA results will also be sent to the university registrar and to respective associate deans of the university for dissemination to their faculty.

WHAT HAPPENS IF STUDENTS FAIL IN THE PELA?

Students who scored Band 3 in the PELA will be advised to take an elective English subject, i.e., CU1000: English for Academic Purposes, because this subject is designed to fulfil students' expected language learning outcomes. The office of the Registrar will take the lead in advising Band 3 students to review and amend their study plan so that these identified students will be able to accommodate CU1000 into their study schedule as they go through their candidature. They will also be invited to meet with any learning advisor in order to

discuss further their academic goals and ways to help them achieve their goals. Moreover, they will be encouraged to seek English writing support from the English peer tutors of the peer tutoring program that learning advisors are facilitating. More importantly, they will be encouraged to attend the weekly workshops that the Learning Support unit conducts so that their learning and writing needs are addressed. They, too, can opt for personal or face-to-face consultations with learning advisors for any language problems they might face or will continually face. Other services that they can avail of are found in the Learning Support webpage. Link here: <https://www.jcu.edu.sg/student-life/student-support-services/learning-support>

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