From principles to practice: Implementing an English language proficiency model at UniSA

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In 2012, the University of South Australia launched the "English language model": a university-wide strategy aimed at developing the English language proficiency of all coursework students. While it responded directly to the *Good Practice Principles for English Language Proficiency for International Students in Australian Universities* (2009), the model required changes to academic language and learning (ALL) practice that were contentious with staff and students, including the introduction of a new post-entry English language assessment, and the recasting of ALL work within an English language frame. Six months into the model, minor revisions were required, as many staff resisted implementing the model as it was originally conceived. This paper reports on research conducted one year into the model that aimed to understand whether, and to what extent, the model's conceptualisation of English language proficiency, and its corresponding reconceptualisation of ALL practice, had been subsequently understood and put into practice by staff and students. A mixed-methods approach was used drawing primarily on staff interview transcripts, triangulated where possible with student survey feedback, and ALL team individual consultation records. Findings suggest that while staff are highly supportive of particular aspects of the model, and the idea of a model more broadly, they have actively resisted the way it sought to refocus certain ALL practices on a narrow construct of English language. The findings discussed here offer insights into some of the complexities that can emerge when implementing an English language strategy.

Key Words: English language proficiency, post-entry English language assessment, PELA, academic literacies.

1. Introduction

The University of South Australia (UniSA) has introduced a new "English language model": a university-wide strategy aimed at developing the English language proficiency of all coursework students. It is the culmination of the three-year English Language Proficiency Project, established in 2009 to devise a more strategic approach to students' language development. The project was driven by the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic) and the Director of the Learning and Teaching Unit, who brought together key teaching and learning representatives from all four Divisions of UniSA, and appointed an English language consultant from the School of Communications, International Studies and Languages to lead conceptualisation and design. The new model was endorsed by UniSA's Academic Board in 2011 and launched in January 2012.

When the project was first established, the prevailing discourse on language development was being heavily shaped by the *Good Practice Principles for English Language Proficiency for*

International Students in Australian Universities (2009), often referred to as the *Good Practice Principles* report. Commissioned by the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR), it was influential in guiding universities' language strategies, in part due to speculation that it may inform standards (for example, see Trounson, 2011). Its ten principles cover a range of areas, including admissions processes, transition and acculturation, and quality assurance, but UniSA's model focusses mainly on two of the report's themes (2009, p. 4): university-wide strategy, policy and resourcing (Principles 1 and 2), and curriculum design and delivery (Principles 5, 6 and 7). Within these themes, two principles in particular were influential (2009, p. 3):

6. Development of English language proficiency is integrated with curriculum design, assessment practices and course delivery through a variety of methods.
7. Students' English language development needs are diagnosed early in their studies and addressed, with ongoing opportunities for self-assessment.

Guided by these, UniSA's English language model has two central elements: the integration of language development into the curriculum, and an online language screening tool of the sort commonly referred to in the literature as a post-entry English language assessment, or PELA (Dunworth, 2009; Dyson, 2009; Ransom, 2009; Murray, 2010b). Of 39 Australian universities, 27 now use a PELA, an increase from 18 in the year before the *Good Practice Principles* were released (Barthel, 2013).

The new model required changes to the teaching practices of staff from across the university. Firstly, UniSA redirected the work of its academic language and learning (ALL) unit; the team was restructured to adopt much of the responsibility for the new model, and its activities, which had previously addressed language and learning more broadly, were reconceived to address a narrower construct of English language proficiency informed by the *Good Practice Principles*. Secondly, discipline-based teaching staff were asked to integrate language development into their curriculum, with support from ALL staff, and were no longer allowed to refer their students directly to the ALL team for advice on their learning; students first had to complete the PELA and score below a threshold to demonstrate eligibility for individual teaching. Negative reactions from both ALL staff and discipline-based teaching staff about certain elements of the model led to "pushback" from senior teaching and learning leaders (Murray & Hicks, in press) and as a result, the model was revised six months into its implementation.

This "pushback" or resistance from staff against the model provided the impetus for this paper, as it appeared to point to some divergence in how the role of the ALL team was conceptualised by the English Language Proficiency Project group on the one hand, and the broader University community on the other, which was leading to problems putting the model into practice. A research project was conducted in early 2013, one year after the model's launch, which aimed to identify the extent to which the model was actually understood by staff, and was being successfully implemented as planned. The research used a mixed-methods approach, drawing primarily on 29 staff interview transcripts which were triangulated where possible with student survey feedback, and ALL team individual consultation records. The research methods generated a rich body of data with many possible focal points. This paper reports on the three topics that emerged most strongly from the data: having "a model", the use of a PELA, and post-PELA provision of language development. The discussion will then identify how the findings could be helpful for institutions devising or refining their language strategies in the current context.

2. UniSA context and its English language model

UniSA enrols over 35,000 students across four metropolitan campuses, two small regional campuses, and a small number of transnational programs. Professionally focussed, its largest programs are in business, education, health sciences, and information technology. It has a strong equity agenda; around 27% of students are classified as "low-socioeconomic status" (Wheelahan, 2009), and sub-degree programs offered by UniSA College provide alternative pathways into undergraduate programs. Approximately 35% of students are international, only

18% of whom gain entry with an English language test score, such as the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) or the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL); most enter on the basis of results from previous studies in English or pathway programs (Murray, 2010a). Given this student diversity, range of entry pathways, and commitment to widening participation, it was determined from the outset that a whole-of-university approach was required, addressing language development for *all* coursework students (Murray & Hicks, in press). While some universities have opted for strategies targeting particular cohorts such as international students (for example, Griffith University's English Language Enhancement Strategy), it was felt that UniSA needed a broad, inclusive approach.

The first step was to define the theoretical construct of language on which UniSA would base its model. The *Good Practice Principles* report uses the term "English language proficiency" (ELP), and defines it as:

> the ability of students to use the English language to make and communicate meaning in spoken and written contexts while completing their university studies. Such uses may range from a simple task such as discussing work with fellow students, to complex tasks such as writing an academic paper or delivering a speech to a professional audience. This view of proficiency as the ability to organise language to carry out a variety of communication tasks distinguishes the use of "English language proficiency" from a narrow focus on language as a formal system concerned only with correct use of grammar and sentence structure.

Although this definition works to "raise" ELP above the perception that it equates to grammatical competence (Humphreys & Gribble, 2013, p. 78), its necessary brevity and broadness have meant that it has been interpreted and expanded into at least three different models (Murray, 2010a; Harper, Prentice, & Wilson, 2011; O'Loughlin & Arkoudis, cited in Arkoudis, Baik & Richardson, 2012). The models tend to agree – taking their lead from the *Good Practice Principles* definition above – that ELP has three facets in a university context: general or everyday communication, academic literacy or literacies, and professional communication. Yet, they disagree about the relationship between these facets and the terminology that best describes them (Humphreys & Gribble, 2013).

UniSA's model is based on a construct of ELP put forward by Murray (2010a, 2013), who proposed a "tripartite division of competencies": three facets of proficiency which are distinguishable, even though they overlap conceptually and in practice. These are general English proficiency, academic literacies, and professional communication skills. General English proficiency is derived from the concept of "communicative competence" (Canale & Swain, 1980; Bachman, 1990) and involves competence with grammar and general reading, writing, speaking and listening skills. As "an investment in language that can be 'cashed in' in *any* potential context of use" (Murray, 2010a, p. 58), it functions as a pre-requisite for developing the two remaining competencies. Murray's (2010a; 2013) description of academic literacies is drawn from researchers such as Lea and Street (1998) and Rex and McEachen (1999), and represents students' "conversancy" in the socially-situated genres, rhetorical structures, vocabulary, and cultures of inquiry associated with particular disciplines. Professional communication relates to the skills students need beyond university in their chosen profession, and involves a range of interpersonal skills and group and leadership skills that, like academic literacies, can be discipline-specific (Murray, 2010a, 2013).

Translating this theoretical construct of ELP into a model of practice, Murray (2010a) argues that *all* students, native and non-native English speakers alike, will require development of academic literacies and professional communication skills, so these should be addressed in the core curriculum. Only *some* students, however, will need to develop their general English proficiency. This, Murray argues, should be developed outside the curriculum in credit-bearing academic English courses or services offered by ALL units, such as individual consultations.

At UniSA, the development of academic literacies and professional communication skills is therefore designed to occur in program curricula through "embedding" (Jones, Bonnano, &

Scouller, 2001; Wingate, 2006; Stevenson & Kokkinn, 2007), whereby language development is incorporated explicitly into teaching and assessment. Responsibility for embedding at UniSA belongs to lecturers and tutors, with ALL staff responsible for providing professional development and support (Murray & Hicks, in press). This moves away from "bolt-on" approaches that teach language separately from course content, and towards a "built-in" approach (Wingate, 2006).

At UniSA, general English language proficiency, the third facet of ELP, is developed by ALL staff outside the curriculum via two forms of individualised teaching. The first is individual consultations whereby students receive general English advice on assignment drafts; a maximum of eight 30-minute consultations are available in a 12-month period. The second is written feedback on marked assignments; students can electronically submit two assessed pieces of coursework (including lecturer feedback and grades) for general English feedback. Despite a range of perspectives in the literature about the value and efficacy of individual consultations (Chanock, 2007; Huijser, Kimmins, & Galligan, 2008; Wilson, Li, & Collins, 2011; Arkoudis, Baik & Richardson, 2012, p.41-42) and reports from some intuitions that they are being scaled back (Harris & Ashton, 2011), they remain part of ALL work in 38 of the 39 Australian universities (Barthel, 2013). Language feedback on marked assignments, however, is a practice not evident in the ALL literature as being used at any other Australian university.

When UniSA's model commenced, access to individual teaching was available only to students referred from Counselling and Disability services, external students, and students identified by the PELA as linguistically at-risk. Although PELAs take a wide variety of forms and assess a range of linguistic constructs (Dunworth, 2009), UniSA's PELA, the English Language Self-Assessment Tool (ELSAT), assesses only general English language[1]. This is based on the work of Murray (2010a, p. 62) who argues that a PELA – if it is used – need only assess general English as the other facets of ELP should be "taught as a matter of course to all students as an integral part of the curriculum". The decision was made to keep the ELSAT optional rather than making it a mandatory part of enrolment or coursework, due in part to resourcing constraints and internal perceptions of a "testing" mechanism (Murray & Hicks, in press). Therefore, students seeking individual teaching, and students referred to the ALL team by lecturers and tutors, had to first score below a specific threshold on the ELSAT to gain access. To support all three facets of ELP, the model also incorporates online resources and extra-curricular or "generic non-credit" workshops (Barthel, 2013) open to all students. These are included to support the embedding process as it becomes established, and also to better support students ineligible for individualised teaching.

In the model's first six months, there was a considerable amount of negative feedback from lecturers and tutors who had lost the capacity to directly refer to the ALL team students they thought were at-risk for reasons that may have included, but were often unrelated to, language. Moreover, students were not attempting the ELSAT in significant numbers. Between January and June 2012, 261 students attempted it, which at a university of 35,000 students represents very low engagement. This led to concerns that the ELSAT created a barrier between students and language development opportunities and as a result, senior teaching and learning

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[1] The ELSAT is a licenced, online version of the Academic English Screening Test which was developed as a paper-based test by the University of Melbourne's Language Testing Research Centre as an alternative to their Diagnostic English Language Assessment (DELA). While the DELA serves a diagnostic function by identifying the English language needs of students, the ELSAT is a simple screening tool designed to identify students likely to be "at-risk" due to their English language proficiency (http://ltrc.unimelb.edu.au/research/current). The ELSAT has three parts. Part A is a text-completion exercise in which students must correctly complete partially deleted words in short extracts of text. Part B is a cloze elide in which students must delete any redundant words interspersed throughout a long passage of text. Part C is a short essay that asks students to write a brief, essay-style response to a question on a general topic. The test is timed and takes one hour to complete. While the test and the tabulation of scores happen relatively automatically online, the ALL team is responsible for all other administration related to the ELSAT.

representatives requested an official revision to the model. Now, all coursework students are entitled to one initial individual consultation where ALL staff explain the model and encourage students to complete the ELSAT. This means that teaching staff can directly refer students to the ALL team for an initial individual consultation, where their needs will be assessed and, if follow-up appointments are needed, they will be asked to complete the ELSAT.

It remains unclear whether the negative responses to the new model, although officially addressed by formal changes to certain processes, continue to affect the way staff work within and around the model. The resistance seen in the first six months could well have been the result of a single, contentious issue (access to individual consultations), but it could perhaps be symptomatic of a more generalised resistance to the model, its focus on ELP, and its reconstruction of ALL work. It is important, therefore, to determine whether staff have successfully understood the model and taken it up in practice, or whether they continue to furtively and informally resist it at the "chalk face".

3. Research methods and data sets

The findings reported in this paper are the product of a mixed-methods research project in which the primary data source, staff interview transcripts, was triangulated where possible with student survey feedback, and ALL team individual consultation records. The aim was to examine the extent to which the model's conceptualisation of ELP, and its corresponding reconceptualisation of ALL practice, had been understood and successfully translated into practice.

Staff interview transcripts were gathered from 29 semi-structured interviews conducted with staff in early 2013. Formal questions and impromptu follow-up questions were designed to reveal three things: how staff *understood* the new model, how they *behaved* within it, and the *attitudes* they held towards it (questions can be found in Appendix A). Participants included members of the ALL team, staff who work closely with the ALL team, and staff who were involved in the model's design and establishment; all were considered important stakeholders in the model. Of the 29 staff interviewed, 12 were members of the ALL team. The 17 remaining staff included: six from other teams within the Learning and Teaching Unit (which includes among other teams research education staff, academic developers, disability advisors, and counsellors); four degree program directors (one from each academic division); three course coordinators (elsewhere called subject or unit convenors), and four senior teaching and learning leaders (for example, Associate Deans Education). Each of the four academic divisions was represented by at least two staff. Two of the participants were professional (or non-academic) staff and 27 were academic; 20 were female and seven were male. All interviews were one-on-one, with one exception where three staff were interviewed together[2]. Each interview took approximately one hour. To maintain anonymity, interview participants are identified in the paper by pseudonyms.

Individual consultation records were short summaries entered daily into an ALL team database which described the nature of every individual consultation held with students. They took a narrative form, describing the nature of the student inquiry and topics that were covered in the consultation. In addition, ALL staff could label the primary focus of each consultation by selecting from a menu of common topics. These labels and summaries together identified the reasons students sought out individual consultations and the range of issues they addressed. The student feedback used here is from an annual, end-of-year survey sent to students who had attended an individual consultation. Distributed online, it collected both qualitative and quantitative information about student satisfaction, the impact of ALL advice, and general

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[2] In that case, a meeting had been scheduled with three participating staff and they chose to take that opportunity to be interviewed simultaneously. The divergence in responses indicates they were not overly influenced by each other and the resulting transcripts have been read as three one-on-one interviews.

strengths and weakness of ALL team practices. Both sources offered data from before and after the launch of the new model.

4. Findings

4.1. Having "a model"

There was strong consensus that *having* "a model" was necessary in the current higher education context. Although staff identified a range of reasons why a model might be valuable, including better identification of at-risk students, and more systematic development of language across program curricula, 28 of 29 staff expressed support for the model's capacity to more directly address the issue of language at an institutional level. This supports other research which reported that staff tended to welcome language-related initiatives (Harris, 2009).

Although staff endorsed the idea of a model, they did not share a consistent understanding of the one in place at UniSA. Staff described the model in three main ways: as three theoretical facets of ELP addressed via different teaching practices; as a suite of teaching practices not necessarily connected to an ELP theory, or as a testing mechanism that facilitates entitlements to individual teaching. Within the ALL team, staff tended to explain the model as three theoretical facets which then translate, with variable success, into a range of teaching practices. This is understandable, given their familiarity with the model itself and its theoretical underpinnings. Staff from outside the ALL team, however, most commonly understood the model as a testing mechanism: "[n]ow when you talk about the model like, for me, this is already an interesting question because I go, 'what is she talking about?' Is she talking about the ELSAT, or is she talking about something more than that?" (Nicole, program director). Given that most of the model's elements (embedding work, online resources, workshops, and individual consultations) had been part of the ALL team's work before the model was introduced, staff perhaps perceived that the ELSAT, as the *new* element, constituted the model entirely.

While understandings of the model varied, some staff observed that having a model had helped to develop staff understandings of ELP by offering a vocabulary for exploring and unpacking the concept in more nuanced ways. Heidi (Language and Learning team) reported: "[i]t gives us something to talk about, okay, it gives the whole university something quite concrete to talk about. It gives us a common language, some terms to actually refer to … so that's a real positive." The effect of having a shared vocabulary could be observed in interviews, particularly when staff described their understanding of ELP. Of 29 staff, 28 clearly conceptualised ELP as something far broader than grammatical competence, encompassing academic literacies and, for some, professional communication. One staff member in particular spoke about how the model reflected her own experiences of students' ELP as multi-faceted:

> I think it's important to not *just* look at English language, so I really like the three pronged element of the model, I think that's very positive, because you can for example have people that are quite good in terms of their English language skills but their academic literacies are poor, or they're okay at academic discourse but hopeless at professional communication, so I like that part of it. (Janice, senior teaching and learning leader)

So while the model might have been understood differently by each staff member, in the main, staff embraced both the *idea* of a model, and its multi-faceted definition of ELP.

4.2. The use of a PELA

The ELSAT was the most talked about topic in interviews. However, there was some misunderstanding about what the ELSAT *is* exactly. While staff within the ALL team were intimately familiar with it, staff outside the ALL team described a range of perceptions. Some believed that it enabled students to self-assess their language, offering guidance about how they might develop it. Some believed it to have a diagnostic function that provides information about linguistic strengths and weaknesses. Others pointed out that there had been "secrecy" surrounding the ELSAT when it was introduced; these staff had asked to see it, and were told

they could not. This "secrecy" perhaps explains why some staff are unclear about what the ELSAT involves, and perhaps why they might be reluctant to refer students to it.

The ELSAT received mainly criticisms from all staff interviewed, chiefly for its use as a gatekeeping mechanism for managing access to individual consultations. The ELSAT appeared to disempower staff, both inside and outside the ALL team, because they could no longer use their own professional judgement to identify students who might benefit from talking to an ALL adviser. Instead, that judgement was to be made by a testing mechanism. Moreover, most staff identified that a majority of students who approach or are referred to the ALL team are both likely to need individual assistance and unlikely to submit to a test. Wendy (senior teaching and learning leader) reported that "even the thought of putting the student into a position of having to test them when they were already having struggles was an issue for [staff] because they felt like it was another confidence drainer about their abilities". The instincts of staff that students were likely to be put off by the ELSAT are confirmed by usage statistics. Very few students engaged with the tool. By June 2013 – 18 months into the model – less than 400 students had voluntarily taken it.

Comments about the ELSAT reveal that even after the revision was made to the model to better accommodate staff and student expectations of ALL individual consultations, staff have continued to sidestep and resist the ELSAT. For example, students and staff quickly realised that students are only required to attempt the ELSAT if they want to access ongoing individual teaching. In such cases, there is a strong incentive to "fail" it, so by and large, students do. Over 90% of the students who have taken the ELSAT voluntarily have been eligible for individual teaching. One Program Director (Nicole) confirmed something the ALL team had heard anecdotally, which was that staff were advising students to do badly:

> I'd say, "you know, I think you need to go and get some help. Just go and do
> this ELSAT test, and the idea is, actually, that you fail it". And I gave them
> that message: "so fail the test, and then you'll get all the help you need".

In addition, staff within the ALL team admitted to consulting with some students more than once, even though those students had never completed the ELSAT.

Despite these attempts by staff to minimise the impact of the ELSAT on student access to individual teaching, evidence suggests that it may still form a barrier for some students. The voluntary nature of the ELSAT means that the only incentive for completing it is access to individual teaching, and yet of all students eligible for individual teaching on the basis of ELSAT results, about 30% have not ever visited the ALL team. This could perhaps indicate that the process of completing the ELSAT deters students from following up with the team.

Interestingly, despite a lack of clarity about what the ELSAT does, and widespread criticism of how it was used and its effect on students, there was very strong support for a test *of some sort*. Of 29 staff, 21 believed that a language assessment mechanism would be valuable for the University. Although no staff outside the ALL team exhibited an understanding of the complexities involved in language testing, or its limitations in a university context, staff were in the main attracted to the potential offered by a test to identify students who may be at-risk.

4.3. The post-PELA provision of language development

4.3.1. Individual consultations

Another area of strong consensus emerged in staff descriptions of individual consultations, one part of the post-PELA language development offered within the model. Staff had to be asked slightly different questions on this topic, depending on their position in the university and their familiarity with individual consultations (see Appendix A): staff outside the ALL team were asked to describe what they *expected* to happen in an individual consultation, while ALL staff (who conduct individual consultations regularly) were asked to describe their experiences of what *does* happen. There was a high degree of consistency between the descriptions of all staff, as discussed below.

Looking first at the 17 staff outside the ALL team, only three expected the focus of the consultations to be largely on language. The remaining 14 expected that individual consultations would take a more holistic approach, focussing particularly on the requirements of the assessment task and the ALL adviser's assessment of the student's most pressing needs. Looking within the ALL team, most staff reported approaching individual consultations in this holistic way. Two mentioned that general English is often the topic requiring the most attention, while the remaining 10 described three main areas of focus: interpreting task requirements, reassurance on a draft, and then grammar and sentence structure.

The database of ALL individual consultation records confirms that these were the three primary reasons students attended individual consultations, both before and after the model was launched. So despite the significant changes to the focus of individual consultations that the new model required, ALL staff reported that general English language is typically not dealt with in individual consultations as a primary focus. What *is* dealt with would better be described as academic literacies.

In a regulatory context, there is some anxiety about the failure of individual consultations to deal explicitly and exclusively with general English in the way the model describes. One staff member reported:

> I do deliberately make an effort to find some grammatical thing, or some sentence thing to actually talk about before they walk out the door, but I don't believe it's actually going in, because that isn't what they've come for themselves (Heidi, Language and Learning team).

However, most staff emphasised the value, and the logic, in maintaining a holistic approach to individual consultations for the reason Fiona (Language and Learning team) suggests:

> if you only looked at the language and what they were writing you wouldn't actually be helping them to be successful in that assignment sometimes, because you might have a beautiful, grammatically correct sentence that is completely irrelevant and off topic. So that's not actually helping the student to unpack the question that they've been given and think about how they apply that knowledge to answering the question.

Though impact data from individual consultations is not available, students remain extremely satisfied with the team's approach to the way individual consultations are conducted. In 2012, 2,578 individual consultations took place, and 98.3% of respondents would recommend ALL advice to other students. This positivity was pleasing, given the major changes to student access made by the model.

4.3.2. Language feedback on assessed coursework

While this paper has so far reported on themes that were discussed widely within staff interviews, language feedback on assignments was notable for its absence. Only three staff mentioned it as part of the model. This is largely because only four students (from almost 400 eligible students) have requested language feedback since the model commenced. One ALL staff member suggested that this is because students' schedules demand that they focus on the *next* thing that is due, giving them little time to reflect back on work already completed. The almost total lack of interest from students suggests that offering written language feedback in the way that was trialled at UniSA is not a viable part of the model and it is likely to be omitted in future evolutions.

One form of language feedback that was discussed at length, however, was that provided by discipline-based teaching staff in their assessment of coursework. Four staff commented on the need for greater support in marking assignments, particularly those affected by grammar and sentence structure. Unsure how to handle such assignments, staff refer students to the ALL team for advice, but struggle with giving an equitable mark and valuable feedback:

> Every now and again we have discussions about how should we mark an assignment that is good in content but where you really have to dig around

and work out what they're saying. So if you can understand it, do you ignore the English? (Nicole, Program Director).

"Ignoring" English in the way Nicole describes is increasingly difficult, given that the *Good Practice Principles* and other key documents such as the *Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards)* position ELP as a graduate attribute, the development and assessment of which must be evidenced.

Just how this should be handled, however, is a complex issue. For while there is increasing pressure to identify and assess English language levels for university study, the research literature has noted the absence of any agreed upon levels, and the difficulty inherent in trying to establish them (Dunworth, 2013; Murray & Arkoudis, 2013). Part of this difficulty stems from a lack of consensus about *what kind* of English might best form the basis for assessment in the current context. For example, should Australian universities assess standard British English, International or Global English, or something else? The practical implications of this dilemma were described vividly by Maria (Course Coordinator):

> I had another colleague that I coordinated a course with once … and she would insist on failing a student if she couldn't get the message in the assignment. I differed, and this is a debate that we never resolved. She would say that if the sentences aren't well constructed the student fails. Her argument was, "I can understand what my four-year-old granddaughter says, but that doesn't mean she's speaking well" … we literally fought over it, because I refused to fail the student if I could understand what they were saying … I speak five languages and I speak English, so for me English isn't something sacred … Whereas for her, abuse of English, or what she perceived as an abuse of English, was something unforgivable … she would literally throw the assignments on the floor.

The difficulties faced by staff when assessing language, described here by Maria and Nicole, are not easily addressed in the current context which lacks well-defined standards.

5. Discussion

5.1. Defining ELP for an ELP model

Research has suggested that any ELP strategy, if it is to be successful, must first identify a working definition of ELP that is grounded in the research literature on language development (Dunworth, 2013; Dunworth, Drury, Kralik, & Moore, 2013). While UniSA certainly did this, building on the definition provided by the *Good Practice Principles*, some of the issues identified above seem to have emerged from the way its "tripartite division" was translated into practice. Although Murray's (2010a, p. 58) conceptual model argues that the three ELP facets invariably overlap and "invoke" one another, in practice these facets were separated to be addressed at different sites – and by different staff – within the institution. The effects of this were most acutely felt in individual teaching, the focus of which was expected to change significantly.

Historically, individual teaching had been based on an assessment of a student's needs in the context of the particular assessment task they were working on. Advisers would assess not only general English, but the full range of linguistic demands emerging from that task and the discipline underpinning it, thereby addressing all three facets of ELP simultaneously. In that way, their approach more accurately reflected the complexities inherent in language development, complexities acknowledged by the conceptual model that the model of practice attempted to circumvent. Individual teaching thereby came to be driven by an ELP model that, problematically, conflicted with what staff and students believed to be valuable. While in practice the conduct of individual teaching at UniSA has reverted back to its pre-model form, something that most staff were happy about, the "tripartite division" of ELP did not adequately reflect how language development occurs at university, and has not been helpful for guiding individual teaching practices.

The definition of ELP warrants further discussion, as the sector-wide discourse on ELP is moving from a discussion about principles to talk of standards, for example in documents such as the *Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards)*. It has been argued that to establish any ELP standards, there must first be an agreed upon definition of ELP (Humphreys & Gribble, 2013, p. 78). While there is some consensus across the three ELP models referred to earlier that ELP has three facets in a university context (general or everyday communication, academic literacy or literacies, and professional communication), the research reported here suggests that translating a multi-faceted model into practice can be challenging, and that any segmentation of ELP should be avoided. For example, the model proposed by O'Loughlin and Arkoudis (cited in Arkoudis, Baik & Richardson, 2013) identifies three facets of ELP similar to Murray's, but it places these facets along a continuum of development and suggests that each facet becomes relevant at different points in a degree program (general English on entry, academic literacies during the program experience, and professional communication on exit). While it is easy to see how this staged approach might reflect some students' *primary* concerns at each program phase, it is not necessarily an accurate reflection of language learning at university, which necessarily takes place within the context of an assessment task, and therefore incorporates both academic literacies and general English. Moreover, it is unclear how O'Loughlin and Arkoudis' model is reflective of the language learning required in professionally-oriented programs such as Nursing or Education, where proficiency in workplace communication is demanded from the first semester via practicum and placement assessments. A model such as that suggested by Harper, Prentice, and Wilson (2011) might be more applicable, in that it argues for a conceptualisation of ELP in which the three facets are developed simultaneously, via highly contextualised approaches.

It is useful to examine these models of ELP in the context of the *English Language Standards for Higher Education* (ELSHE), which are based on the *Good Practice Principles* and were submitted to DEEWR in 2010 for inclusion in a standards framework. The ELSHE (2010, p. 8-9) document states:

> while there is no single "best" way to develop students' English language proficiency, contextualisation within disciplines and integration of language development across the curriculum seem likely to be effective approaches. "Integration" in this context means taking a holistic view across a discipline to address needs through a variety of means, including: embedding language development through curriculum design and assessment; workshops or credit-bearing units within a course; "adjunct" workshops or sessions within a course; developing workplace communication through preparation for work placements and practica; and targeted individual or group support provided by academic language and learning experts.

What is critical here is that although language development might occur at a "variety" of sites, including the core curriculum, "adjunct" workshops, or individual support, the approach taken should be integrated and holistic, driven by the disciplinary requirements and each student's attempts to meet them via each assessment task. This means that the UniSA model, which takes an "integrated" approach with regard to two of the three facets, but takes a more decontextualised and generic approach to the other, needs to revisit its conceptualisation of individual teaching to better align with the proposed standards.

5.2. The use of a PELA as a "gatekeeping" mechanism

The research reported above also raises questions about the way in which the PELA was used at UniSA. It is important to note that staff criticisms of UniSA's ELSAT (which is based on a test designed by the University of Melbourne's Language Testing Research Centre) should not be taken to reflect the quality of the test itself; it has been assessed as a valid rater of language ability. Rather, its position at UniSA – as a tool that managed access to individual teaching – created a strong incentive to fail which has led to validity problems in practice. The role of the ELSAT must be rethought to ensure it is fulfilling its potential to *identify* students at-risk and *facilitate* access to language development, because it is currently not achieving either successfully.

One other Australian university, Curtin, uses a PELA that is very similar to UniSA's ELSAT, and similar issues have been identified. Curtin's *UniEnglish* is, like the ELSAT, optional, online, and available to students at any time of the year; in addition, students scoring below the threshold are advised to attend language and learning classes, but these students are not followed up, and so completion rates are low (Dunworth, 2010, cited in Barrett-Lennard, Dunworth, & Harris, 2011). Such problems, it has been noted, affect the capacity for PELAs to achieve some of their potential benefits, including identifying students who may be at-risk (Dunworth, 2009; Barrett-Lennard, Dunworth, & Harris, 2011), helping students understand their own language needs, and generating good quality data for the institution about student abilities which can then inform language development initiatives (Dunworth, 2009).

One possible way to enhance the impact of currently centralised, voluntary PELAs is to incorporate them into a core course as an early, low-stakes assessment item or submission requirement. This has been trialled elsewhere (Harris, 2009), and also at UniSA, the results of which will form the basis of an upcoming paper. Strategies such as these that take a more embedded approach were found in a nation-wide survey of PELA practices to form the majority of PELA approaches in Australia, with a majority administered in courses targeting new students (Dunworth, 2009). Furthermore, research from Edith Cowan University that trialled a range of paper-based and online language assessments with undergraduate and postgraduate students found that a PELA will be most effective when it is embedded at the beginning of semester, targets *all* commencing students, and is linked closely to "a range of support options" (Harris, 2009, p. 94).

The interest in PELAs, in part prompted by the *Good Practice Principles*, has led to a growth in their use, but Dunworth (2009, A7) warns that they should be approached with some caution: "the constraints and limitations of such instruments should be made clear to decision-makers and … PELAs should not be accorded a greater significance in terms of their results than other indicators of student performance". What is helpful for these "decision-makers" is the variety of forms PELAs take in the Australian context, and the variety of linguistic capacities they assess, which offer universities a wide range of options that can be considered in view of the PELA's purpose within their larger English language strategies. What is critical is that any available research data is taken into account when decisions are made.

6. Conclusion

The findings reported in this paper offer insights into some of the benefits and challenges of implementing a university-wide English language model. Among the benefits that can be seen in the UniSA data is the broadening of staff understandings of ELP from a focus on grammatical competence to one that acknowledges the complexities of developing language in discipline-specific academic and professional contexts. Moreover, the introduction of a model was very well received by staff, who felt that the University should be taking a more pro-active approach to language. A third element of the model that was very positively received, but not discussed in detail in this paper, was the embedding of academic literacies and professional communication. This theme was discussed at length by staff and pointed to by many as the most beneficial element of the model. An exploration of this theme will form the basis of another paper.

Implementation challenges emerged, however, when the "tripartite division" of ELP was translated into individual teaching practices. Although Murray's conceptual model shares core features with other models of ELP in the literature, its translation into practice imposed a focus on general English proficiency in individual teaching that unhelpfully attempted to mediate the needs of students and the expectations of staff for more multi-faceted language development. It also led to a problematic deployment of the PELA which diminished its potential benefits. The *English Language Standards for Higher Education* has since emphasised the importance of taking a holistic view of language development across a variety of methods, and the suite of practices within UniSA's model could be revisited with that in mind.

As a starting point, discipline-based teaching staff could be better utilised for the early-identification of students at-risk due to language. The tendency for these staff to view language in a multi-dimensional way, their demonstrated commitment to identifying students having difficulties with language requirements, and their general support for some sort of early language "test" suggests they could play more of a role in the post-entry assessment of language, given the right frameworks and support. Moreover, engaging discipline-based teaching staff in discussions about PELA could facilitate more widespread course-embedding of the ELSAT – or another context-appropriate PELA – which would allow for more effective identification of at-risk students across whole cohorts. When at-risk students are identified on this scale rather than individually, a far broader and arguably more efficient range of language development options then becomes available, including tutorial groups streamed on the basis of language, additional workshops closely aligned to course and program language demands, or peer-learning opportunities. The continued exclusion of discipline-based teaching staff from the process of identifying students at-risk, and the design of follow-up language development, is likely to further position language development as ALL business and not the "joint venture" (Dunworth, 2013, p. 43) it should ideally be.

Acknowledgements

Appendix A. Interview and participant details.

Interview questions for L3 team

1. Could you take a few minutes to explain UniSA's English language model?
2. Could you describe the role ELSAT has played in the implementation of the model?
3. What is your understanding of the term "embedding academic literacies"?
4. When students come to visit you for 1:1s, what do they typically want to focus on?
5. When staff seek collaborations with you, what do they typically want to focus on?
6. In practice, how well does the model develop students' English language proficiency?
7. Could you outline the positives you see in the model?
8. Could you identify the aspects of the model you would change, and suggest how you might change them?

Interview questions for other UniSA staff

1. Could you take a few minutes to explain UniSA's English language model?
2. Could you describe the role ELSAT has played in the implementation of the model?
3. What is your understanding of the term "embedding academic literacies"?
4. When a student is referred to the L3 team for a 1:1, what do you think the nature of the discussion is?
5. When a staff member collaborates with the L3 team, what do you think the nature of the collaboration is (draw on experiences if possible)?
6. In practice, how well does the model develop students' English language proficiency?
7. Could you outline the positives you see in the model?
8. Could you identify the aspects of the model you would change, and suggest how you might change them?

Process and Participant information

Interview participants included members of the ALL team, staff who work closely with the ALL team (via referrals or embedding, for example), or staff who were involved in the model's design and establishment.

All interviews were one-on-one, with one exception. In that case, a meeting had been scheduled with three participating staff and they chose to take that opportunity to be interviewed simultaneously. The divergence in their responses indicates that they were not overly influenced by each other and the resulting transcripts have been read as three 1:1 interviews.

A total of 27 interviews were conducted with 29 staff.

12 Academic Language and Learning staff were interviewed.

The 17 remaining staff included:
- 6 staff from other teams within the Learning and Teaching Unit,
- 4 Program Directors (one from each Division),
- 3 Course Coordinators, and
- 4 Senior Teaching and Learning Leaders from across the institution.

Each of the four Divisions was represented by at least two staff.

Two of the staff are Professional and 27 are Academic.

20 are female and 7 are male.

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