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Positioning PELA practice within language and literacy development

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Post-entry language assessment (PELA) is commonplace in Australian universities, although there are few commonalities in its implementation. Given this diversity, it is important to consider how PELA practice can be understood, particularly in the light of language and literacy development. While there has been a strong movement towards embedded and discipline-specific language and literacy development in ALL practice, this has not been consistently applied to PELA practice. In Australian PELA practice, a number of fundamental and often unresolved questions persist concerning language and literacy development: who is responsible, how is it best enacted, and who is it for? This paper begins by reviewing the diversity of PELA practice in Australia, followed by a critical review of approaches that position PELA either outside of, or within, language and literacy development. The paper then presents two Western Australian university case studies and considers their work at the interface of PELA and embedded, discipline-specific language and literacy development practices. The paper argues for the need to move beyond a PELA-intervention cycle towards positioning PELA practice as an integral part of language and literacy development.

Key Words: PELA, language and literacy development, embedding.

1. Introduction

In ALL practice, academic language and literacy development is widely viewed to be best embedded, discipline and curriculum based, and develomental (Briguglio, 2014; Briguglio & Watson, 2014; Devereux & Wilson 2008; Harris & Ashton, 2011; Percy, 2014; Richards & Pilcher, 2020; Thies, Wallis, Turner, & Wishart, 2014). As with students' development of their disciplinary knowledge, there is recognition that literacy proficiency is necessarily developed over time, through practice, feedback, and increasing expectations of competence (Arkoudis, 2014; Chanock, 2007; Wingate, 2006). Furthermore, the relationship between academic literacy and disciplinary knowledge is generally viewed as one of co-development, and foundational to effective academic language and literacy development approaches (Barthel et al., 2021).

Within this context, this paper analyses post-entry language assessment (PELA) and how it fits into developmental academic language and learning practice. The starting point for this analysis

is the diversity in PELA practice apparent in Australian universities, and in particular the role and place of a PELA-intervention cycle in informing and supporting language and literacy development. Differences within and between PELA practices have long been recognised in the Australian context (Barthel, 2017; Dunworth, 2009; Dunworth, 2013; Murray, 2012; Read, 2016). Similarly, PELA practice is not a static endeavour or within a static context. The higher education landscape in Australia is changing rapidly, with increasingly diverse and changing student cohorts, levels of preparedness, entry pathways, and teaching modes (Picton & Kahu, 2021). In addition, universities have changing leadership structures and priorities that impact their PELA practices. Consequently, while there has been a strong movement towards embedded and discipline-specific language and literacy development in ALL practice, this has not been consistently applied to PELA practice.

This paper begins with an overview of the diversity of PELA practice in Australia. This is followed by a discussion of the limitations of the PELA-intervention cycle which effectively positions PELA as leading to a language and literacy intervention rather than to language and literacy development. Approaches that do aim to position PELA within a developmental context are then reviewed. This is followed by two Western Australian case studies of PELA practice, themselves negotiating their PELA practice within more embedded, discipline-specific language and literacy development practices. Consequently, the paper argues for a reorientation of the role and functions of PELA to ensure that it is clearly positioned within language and literacy development practice.

2. The diversity of PELA practice in Australia

In the Australian higher education context, concern about the language and literacy readiness of university students has a long history. Notable early diagnostic assessments are the Measuring the Academic Skills of University Students (MASUS) project at the University of Sydney, which began in 1992 (Bonanno & Jones, 2007); the University of Melbourne's Diagnostic English Language Assessment (DELA), in its first form, in 1999 (Ransom, 2009); and the University of Auckland's Diagnostic English Language Needs Assessment (DELNA), in 2002. In a nation-wide study in 2008, Dunworth (2009) identified that 19 of Australia's 39 universities were administering some form of PELA, with another 12 proposing its introduction. By 2016, 27 of the 39 universities had introduced a PELA of some kind (Arkoudis & Doughney, 2014; Barthel, 2017). However, while the term PELA has come to be widely used in Australian universities, this umbrella term encompasses a variety of approaches (Barthel, 2017; Dunworth, 2009; Dunworth, et al., 2014: Read, 2016), manifesting in many forms and assessing a variety of language capacities (Harper, 2013).

In fact, there are some fundamental differences between PELA approaches which universities need to consider as part of broader strategies around language and literacy development. How language is defined in the context of PELA is central to the variations in PELA practice, and its subsequent role in language and literacy development. Some practitioners argue that PELA should assess students' everyday literacy because academic or professional literacies are developed during the course (Harper, Prentice, & Wilson, 2011; Murray, 2010), while Read (2015a) has proposed that PELAs should ultimately focus on academic language competence, academic language proficiency or academic literacies, and can be either generic or discipline based. Edwards et al. (2021) provide a useful review of relevant language and literacy nomenclature while explaining their own preference for the term, *academic language development*. Read (2015b) suggests that a fundamental decision is between opting for a generic or discipline-based assessment. For Arkoudis and Doughney (2016), the focus on terminology has become a "semantic debate" (p. 309) that ultimately alienates disciplinary staff and hinders curriculum-based language development. In any case, conceptions about language and literacy development will greatly impact the kinds of practices that eventuate.

While it can be argued that the different forms of PELA practice are equally valid for determining students' language readiness for university studies, questions of validity should ultimately be linked with language and literacy development. Knoch and Elder's (2013) framework details a series of warrants or requirements, together with the evidence to support them, that can be applied to evaluate a PELA. Within this framework, Knoch and Elder place particular emphasis on institutional policy in defining a PELA's purpose and implementation, and in turn influencing all aspects of PELA practice, including which students are tested, whether testing is mandated, the support provided, and any requirements to attend support options. However, the focus of the framework is skewed towards PELA as a dedicated and distinct test using tasks that are "adequate proxies for those performed in the academic domain" and with results that are "good predictors of language performance in [the] academic domain" (2013, p. 57). Arguably, these warrants sit adjacent to the intended overarching goal of "improving the quality of English and also the academic performance of enrolled students" (2013, p. 49). A broader range of criterion may be needed for determining the most appropriate form of assessment and for language and literacy development in specific university contexts.

In this light, Dunworth et al. (2014, p. 530) highlight the need to "identify which approaches, strategies and models of post-entry language assessment and development … lead to measurably enhanced use of English in an academic context." Similarly, Harper (2013) considers that the broad range of PELA practice apparent in Australian universities, including their associated language definitions and attributes, is best analysed through the relationship of PELA to the university's overarching strategy for English language development. As such, PELA sits at the intersection of how language is defined, how language assessment is approached, and how language development is conceived in Australian higher education.

3. Positioning PELA outside of language and literacy development

Despite the move towards embedded and curriculum-based approaches to language and literacy development in ALL practice, PELA implementation can often be an adjunct practice that is disconnected to students' disciplinary studies. A common approach to language assessment is the PELA-intervention cycle (Edwards et al., 2021; Harris, 2016; Knoch, 2021), where a PELA indicates which students may benefit from completing a short, targeted intervention. This approach may partly result from a view of PELA as a solution to English language proficiency concerns. Increasing recognition of domestic English as an Additional Language (EAL) students, together with broader pedagogical understanding of literacy development in higher education (Maldoni & Lear, 2016; Read, 2015a), has led to a widespread focus on the English language proficiency of all commencing students. By 2015, the Australian government had instituted frameworks and introduced legislation aimed at ensuring that universities and other higher education providers admitted students with sufficient language and literacy skills to study at university and then supported their further development (Department of Education and Training [DEET], 2015; Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency [TEQSA], 2012).

The positioning of PELAs outside of language and literacy development may also result from language and literacy support for students being traditionally situated as adjunct to curriculum in higher education. Central to this is the frequency of positioning language and literacy development as extra-curricular, which arguably reflects an overarching lack of clarity, determination and ownership for language and literacy development generally in higher education (Perry, 2021; Skyrme, 2018). Language and literacy development is largely perceived as extra-curricular and peripheral to course design, as apparent in the PELA-associated terms: *intervention* and *additional support*. As Arkoudis, Baik, and Richardson (2012) argue, this positioning reflects a deficit model of language support where the problem lies with individual students who are then responsible for seeking help and making improvements. Importantly, this model overlooks "the multiple

layers of discipline-specific discourse" (Arkoudis et al., 2012, p. 2) that all learners must develop as part of their course of study.

There are a number of potential disadvantages that can arise from positioning PELA outside of language and literacy development. Firstly, a lone PELA-intervention cycle is unlikely to make a significant change in students' language and literacy. There is a necessary difference between an identification of language problems and a facilitation of language development (Urmston, Raquel, & Aryadoust, 2016); an adjunct follow-up intervention activity may not align with the development of language and literacy in the context of a student's discipline and the curriculum they are engaging with. Given the well-researched reluctance of students to take up extra-curricular support (e.g. Harris, 2009; Read, 2008), embedding support within the curriculum is likely to have the most impact (Arkoudis & Harris, 2019; Barthel et al., 2021; Briguglio, 2014; Briguglio & Watson, 2014; Edwards et al., 2021; Devereux & Wilson 2008; Percy, 2014). An extra-curricular intervention as a result of a PELA identification may provide short-term assistance to students; however, more ongoing and embedded approaches can match the "developmental and cumulative" nature of both English language proficiency and disciplinary literacy (Arkoudis & Harris, 2019, p. 4 cited in Edwards et al., 2021 p. 62).

Furthermore, the implementation of adjunct PELA-intervention cycles can also impact on other aspect of ALL practice. Read (2015a) has noted that PELA can often receive greater attention and resourcing than ongoing language and literacy development. In addition, Dunworth et al. (2014) and Harris (2013) warn that a PELA-intervention cycle can disenfranchise disciplinary staff in their involvement in students' language development. Similarly, Harper (2013) argues that PELA can result in disciplinary staff being excluded from effectively identifying and responding to students' language and literacy needs through assessment and curriculum. In these ways, an adjunct PELA-intervention cycle can maintain the situating of language and literacy development as adjunct to the curriculum.

4. Positioning PELA within language and literacy development

The implementation of adjunct PELA-intervention cycles can suggest a separation between language assessment and language and literacy development. To some extent, this separation is also suggested by industry guidelines. For example, the *Good Practice Principles for English Language Proficiency for International Students in Australian Universities* (AQUA, 2009) distinguishes *Principle 7*: "Students' English language development needs are diagnosed early in their studies and addressed, with ongoing opportunities for self-assessment" from *Principle 6*: the "Development of English language proficiency is integrated with curriculum design, assessment practices and course delivery through a variety of methods". Similarly, the *English Language Policy Making in Higher Education* guide (Knoch, 2021) separately addresses *Post-entry (post-admission) language assessment* (Guide 7), *English language development while studying in an English-medium setting* (Guide 8), and *Providing ongoing feedback and support* (Guide 9). While the interconnection of these principles is suggested, so too is the PELA-intervention cycle as an endpoint rather than as positioned within a broader language and literacy development strategy.

Within the diversity of PELA practice in Australia, however, some approaches have gone further in positioning PELA within language and literacy development. One example is the MASUS diagnostic assessment procedure (Bonanno & Jones, 2007). From the outset, this aproach has been connected to embedding support for all students to develop the academic literacy necessary to fully participate in their studies (Jones, 2001b), and ALL staff collaborating with disciplinary staff to do this (Jones, Bonanno and Scouller, 2001). The procedure is designed to both identify individual student's needs, as well as to develop a cohort "literacy profile" (Bonanno and Jones, 2007, p. 4). Support offered in response to these profiles can then be incorporated into the curriculum for future delivery. This type of approach situates language and literacy development at "the

intersection of general proficiency and academic literacy and their interactivity" (Murray, 2015, p. 140). Another notable approach is the academic language development (ALD) framework at the University of Technology Sydney (Edwards et al. 2021), where an initial PELA is linked to a series of further stages of language assessment and follow-up support within a student's disciplinary studies. Where PELA is only performed once in the first or second semester of students' courses (Harris, 2013; Knoch, 2012; Read, 2015a), there may be little follow-up to the outcomes of this assessment beyond the initial intervention. Edwards et al. (2021) provide a rare example of a repeated and targeted use of PELA over a course to provide identified students "additional follow-up language development support" (p. 59) during the course of their studies. Notably, Arkoudis et al. (2012) propose an English language proficiency (ELP) developmental continuum that includes entry (general language ability), engagement (discipline-based academic and communicative language ability), and exit (professional, academic and communicative language ability) levels.

Positioning PELA within course-based language and literacy development involves both embedding PELA within a disciplinary context and collaboration between ALL staff and disciplinary academics. Barthel et al. (2021) consider the embedding of academic literacy development in disciplinary contexts to be the "most central tenet" of ALL work. However, addressing the challenge of embedded rather than adjunct support requires both the establishment of a shared objective for language and literacy development across the institution and that disciplinary staff are willing and able to collaborate with ALL staff to embed it in the curriculum. This collaboration has been strongly promoted for over twenty years (Arkoudis, Harris, & Kelly, 2015; Briguglio, 2014; Briguglio & Watson, 2014; Cable, Dale, & Day, 2007; Evans, 2000; Evans, Tindale, Cable, & Hamil Mead, 2009; Harris & Ashton, 2011; Jones, Bonanno, & Scouller, 2001; Kennelly et al., 2010). There is a strong argument to consistently extend this collaboration to PELA practice, which can not only inform students of their literacy needs, but also offer equivalent opportunity for disciplinary staff to learn from PELA results, and for feedback to inform curriculum and learning and teaching practices (Ransom, 2009; Read, 2015a).

5. Case studies

The following case studies of two Western Australian universities' PELA practice provide two examples of current ALL work at the interface of PELA and embedded, discipline-specific language and literacy development.

5.1. Curtin University: Faculty of Business and Law

Curtin University has had a university-wide PELA established in its English Language Proficiency policy since 2013 (Baird & Dooey, 2017; Dooey & Grellier, 2020). A PELA, and subsequent intervention if required, are mandated for all commencing students (all academic levels, onshore and offshore offerings), and include sanctions for non-completion. The policy uses the TEQSA (2021) ELP definition: "The ability of students to use the English language to make and communicate meaning in spoken and written contexts while completing their course of study". Each of the university's four Faculties puts the policy into practice with some context-specific differences based on disciplinary needs, student cohorts and student numbers. These differences include variations in the ELP marking criteria categories that generally include the five categories of task fulfillment; grammar, punctuation and spelling; style and word choice; organization, coherence and cohesion; and use of sources and referencing. In 2022, PELA practice in the Faculty of Business and Law (FBL) underwent a fundamental shift intended to provide more relevance of the assessment for students and greater understanding of students' language and literacy needs for disciplinary staff. As part of this, PELA was renamed ELPA (English language proficiency assessment).

The first change concerns the move from a timed, one-off Academic Capability Development (ACD) staff administered and marked extra-curricular writing task, to unit coordinators and tutors determining each student's ELP as part of their marking of the first assignment by using undergraduate (UG) and postgraduate (PG) specific ELP criteria designed by ACD staff. Timely moderation with ACD ensures reliable outcomes and offers opportunities to build disciplinary staff understanding of language and literacy. The second change is that the intervention materials are available to students both before and after their ELP determination. The intervention itself has remained unchanged between PELA and ELPA and has a particular focus on academic acculturation, particular to either the UG or PG cohort and based on the academic literacies that make up the ELP criteria. The interventions are administered and marked by ACD staff. In the context of HDR students, PELA practice is unchanged. In conjunction with their supervisors, each student selects a writing sample from their work towards their candidacy research proposal. This is reviewed by ACD staff using HDR level ELP criteria. Interventions include referrals to other Curtin HDR writing support programs in conjunction with individualized and targeted one-to-one writing support provided by ACD staff. In addition, ELPA is used to inform all HDR students and their supervisory staff of ongoing writing support throughout each student's candidature.

The changes to PELA practice reflect broader changes in the positioning of ALL staff in the Faculty. The ACD team has been purposefully refocused and resourced by Faculty leaders to move from extra-curricular student support to a disciplinary staff development and curriculum-based focus of student support – with particular attention to assessment and feedback. This fundamental change to the work of ACD has implications for how language and literacy development is practiced. In the past, ACD's responsibility for PELA resulted in a high administrative load in terms of distributing, collating, marking and ensuring compliance across the Faculty's multiple units, calendars and campuses. While administration and development of the interventions will continue to require an ongoing ACD resource commitment, the move from an extra-curricular PELA to an embedded ELPA has given the ACD team more time to invest in building relationships with disciplinary staff and engaging in more collaborative and embedded work. The move to ELPA has explicitly embedded PELA in coursework and transferred ongoing responsibility for language and literacy assessment to the collaboration between ALL and disciplinary staff.

5.2. Murdoch University

Murdoch University's Literacy Support Plan (LSP) has been developed as part of a focus on first year as the foundation to future success. The Plan aims to support incoming students entering through diverse pathways through the use of academic diagnostic testing and the provison of additional support. The key elements of the plan are custom-built literacy support plans in 'gateway' units (large core units required for progression in the discipline) incorporating literacy assessments, data collection and analysis, feedback, and follow-up support. The aims of the plan include positively engaging with all students to foster development of literacy skills in their discipline, rather than taking a deficit approach; as well as informing longer-term curriculum development related to literacy development. Other purposes and goals include promoting agency and collaboration around language and literacy development, promoting "dialogue and deeper understanding of how language makes meaning in assignments" (Donohue & Erling, 2012, p. 216), and acting as a change agent towards embedding language and literacy development

The LSP is largely based on the MASUS approach (Bonanno & Jones, 2007), and involves close collaboration between the Support for Learning (S4L) team and disciplinary staff to develop and implement unit specific plans, with S4L staff available to assist with all stages of the plans, including set up, assessment, processing results, and follow-up support. Working with unit coordinators, unit specific PELAs have been developed, in some cases in the form of purpose-built assessments, and in other cases using existing assignments. The LSP includes a Tiered Learning Support model which aims to provide the most appropriate support for students according to their

needs. The three tiers of the model are: Tier 1, Frontline services and resources for all students; Tier 2, Unit or discipline-based support for particular cohorts; and Tier 3, Additional Support for students who need it.

The LSP has shown the potential to foster dialogue and collaboration between ALL staff and disciplinary staff concerning language and literacy development, as well as including disciplinary staff in the identification and development of language and literacy needs. The process has provided mechanisms for working with disciplinary staff to provide students with feedback on specific aspects of their academic writing, as well as identifying areas in which cohorts of students can develop their writing within a disciplinary context. An example of collaboration between ALL staff and disciplinary staff has been collaborative moderation exercises around the use of existing assignments. These collaborations have evolved from issues around the duplication of assessment for the same sample of writing, including discrepancies between literacy assessment results and assignments marks given by tutors. One solution that has emerged is a recognition of the different purposes and perspectives of wholistic assignment marking and literacy assessment, and the use of moderation, or a comparison of results, to identify a more refined list of students who could benefit from additional support. Despite the challenges, the LSP has shown the potential to foster dialogue and collaboration between ALL staff and disciplinary staff concerning students' language and literacy development.

6. Conclusion

This paper has discussed the relationship between PELA and language and literacy development, and in particular, the role of PELA in language and literacy development. PELA practice in Australian higher education tends to be largely extra-curricular and somewhat disassociated from academic language and literacy development theory. Therefore, the paper argues that PELA needs to be clearly and explicitly situated and positioned within the nature of language and literacy learning – contextual, developmental, and achieved through practice and feedback. Adjunct and extra-curricular learning support are often the least favourable form of learning, with context-based learning being associated with greater authenticity, relevance, and application (Briguglio, 2014; McNaught & Beal, 2012). Language and literacy development can be seen to be the realm of ALL specialists, and content to be the realm of disciplinary specialists. However, if content knowledge and the language that shapes, defines, and explains that knowledge are inseparable, then academic language and literacy is best developed collaboratively and embedded in a disciplinary context. In this way, PELA can inform and empower disciplinary staff by raising awareness of and validating students' language and literacy needs as inseparable from learning. PELA can connect ALL and disciplinary staff to develop shared responsibility for and approaches to students' language and literacy development (Harris, 2016).

PELA is inherently and necessarily positioned in relation to developmental language and literacy practice, albeit to various degrees and in various ways. Language and literacy are developed over time and in context. As such, a PELA-intervention cycle alone cannot make a significant change in a student's language and literacy, especially given the focus on students most at-risk. At the same time, written and oral communication criteria are included in course level learning outcomes and graduate attributes, and PELA is best positioned as part of course-based academic literacy and language development. Contemporary approaches to language and literacy development emphasize integration with course curriculum and assessment design (Arkoudis et al., 2012; AUQA, 2009; Wingate, 2016), and PELA outcomes need to inform this design. As such, PELA and any subsequent interventions are best informed by and positioned within a broader approach to language and literacy development.

Positioning PELA practice within language and literacy development can help to promote the connection between ALL practice and teaching and learning, as well as the relationships between

ALL staff and disciplinary academics. How responsibilities for conducting PELA and its subsequent interventions are aligned and enacted can impact the roles of and the relationships between ALL staff and disciplinary staff (Harper & Orr Vered, 2017; Wingate, 2016). The challenges and barriers to building relationships and connections with the curriculum are familiar to ALL staff (Malkin & Chanock, 2018). The work of ALL staff often exists in a grey space where there is an increasing need for explicit, embedded and discipline-specific language and literacy development, which can also be perceived as not being within the responsibility or skill set of disciplinary staff or the requirements of course content. Adjunct PELA practice under ALL staff expertise and responsibility can reinforce this view, in turn maintaining ALL work as peripheral to students' discipline-based learning and disciplinary staffs' curriculum development. Explicit recognition of, responsibility for, and positioning of language and literacy development sit at the centre of where language and literacy development and the curriculum overlap. Therefore, positioning PELA practice within a discipline-based curriculum context is critical to promoting the embedding of academic literacy development as a central principle of ALL work.

7. Acknowledgements

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