

# Assessing and developing English Language Proficiency: a pilot project at Curtin University Sydney

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Driven by perceptions in the community that Australian graduates are lacking the levels of English Language Proficiency (ELP) required for employment, universities are exploring ways of integrating ELP strategies within disciplinary curricula. However, without a standardised measure of the outcomes of ELP strategies, there are limited incentives for lecturers and tutors to redeploy their time from activities that are more readily measureable, such as research. Furthermore, students have less of an incentive to engage in ELP activities or take a developmental approach if prospective employers cannot request a transcript of their progress in ELP. A simple, non-intrusive and efficient way of measuring ELP that is independent of the commitment of lecturers and tutors, or even the interest level of students, is to have English language experts assess existing assignments for ELP with the results and feedback carried forward to benchmark future assignments. This would provide a foundation for measuring the impact of ELP strategies as well as encouraging students to take an interest in their ELP from entry to exit. In this paper we report results from a pilot project to assess the first leg of such an approach. The ELP of 27 students across three units (postgraduate and undergraduate) is assessed using the IELTS writing assessment criteria. While students are able to accurately assess themselves overall, they significantly under-estimate their lexical resources while significantly over-estimating their grammatical range and accuracy. Student evaluations of the exercise indicated improved awareness of ELP proficiency and support for using a unit assignment to assess their ELP.

**Keywords:** English language proficiency, integrating language and discipline skills, assurance of learning

## Introduction and rationale

English language proficiency (ELP) is one of the main factors affecting academic performance (Andrade, 2006; Lee, Farrugia & Brown, 2013; Ramsay, Barker & Jones, 1999; Robertson, Line, Jones & Thomas, 2000; Trice, 2003) as well as workplace readiness and employment outcomes for international students seeking work in Australia (Arkoudis et al., 2009). Over the last decade a consensus in the literature has emerged in favour of a developmental and joint-venture approach to ELP that is inclusive of all students irrespective of their language backgrounds (Dunworth, 2013). This trend is supported by the Government's standards-based approach to

higher education and the Tertiary Education Quality Standards Agency's (TEQSA) focus on ELP (Dunworth, 2013).

The consensus among scholars and researchers is that English language development is best achieved by embedding it within the teaching of the relevant discipline (Dunworth, 2013). However, academic staff have resisted embedding on the grounds that they lack the requisite expertise and the time and space in the curriculum; furthermore, many hold a belief that language development is not part of the academic's role (Dunworth, 2013).

This paper introduces a new approach to embedding and reports the results of a pilot project which implements a framework for in-course measurement and monitoring of English language development, which will be referred to as the *Assessment Tool*. The Assessment Tool involves language and learning advisors addressing a second-order collective action dilemma that we hypothesise to be at the heart of resistance to the embedding of ELP in the disciplinary curriculum.

We argue that language specialists and learning advisors can play a critical role in resolving the problem by assessing the language competencies of students based on the written and oral assessments of the course curriculum. The assessments would target specific language skills, written and oral, as the student progresses in their degree *based on a uniform assessment standard*. The Assessment Tool itself would not require any commitment from instructors or students. Its effectiveness is predicated on the incentives and opportunities produced when students' in-course language progression is measured and monitored at periodic intervals.

The purpose of this paper is to propose a new approach to embedding English language development into disciplinary curriculum and report on a pilot study that implemented one stage of the Assessment Tool. In the next section, we re-examine the problem that language and learning staff have in encouraging academics to cooperate in embedding English language development into disciplinary curriculum and ask whether it can be described as a collective action dilemma. We then introduce the research questions and methodology of the pilot project for implementing the Assessment Tool, followed by a report and discussion of the findings. We conclude by identifying key areas for research going forward.

### **Coordination issues in language development: the rise of embedding**

There has been a strong research focus on students' and lecturers' perceptions of the difficulties arising from real or perceived lack of ELP. Lee, Farrugia and Brown's (2013) study found that ELP and academic performance were positively correlated, meaning that students with a lower level of ELP would consequently have difficulty with their academic studies. They concluded that students with a higher level of ELP also had superior study strategies and performed much more successfully. In a study by Robertson et al (2000), it was found that the students believed their level of ELP was the main reason for their lack of participation in lectures; similarly, the lecturers felt that the main difficulties the students faced lay in comprehending spoken English and being unable to communicate effectively in written English. Ramsay et al. (1999) also found that first-year international students at an Australian university had difficulties comprehending their lecturers, particularly in terms of colloquial vocabulary (idioms, humour), fast speech and

unfamiliar accents. Their study also included domestic students, but focused on their attitudes to learning support systems rather than on perceptions of their ELP.

As a result of studies like these, many universities currently administer language and academic support programs and post entry ELP diagnostic testing, for example the Post Enrolment Language Assessment (PELA) task; however, these interventions are limited. The PELA diagnostic test is an entry test only and is not repeated later as an exit test to ensure the ELP standards have been met (Arkoudis & Doughney, 2014). The learning support programs are offered outside of the main teaching within the discipline and are therefore not content-specific (Arkoudis & Tran, 2010). They primarily target first year students without emphasis on ongoing support, despite findings which suggest that many students still require support after their first year.

In Campbell and Li's (2008) study of Asian international students, several participants admitted that even after completing their first year of university study, they could understand approximately half of the written and verbal instructions they received. The students in this study also reported lack of awareness of the learning support programs offered, and lack of accessibility to their lecturers outside of class. Additionally, any external support programs offered to the students are generally poorly attended, which suggests that students who are struggling the most with their studies would rather not spend their time attending ELP programs and workshops. Lee, Farrugia and Brown (2013) also pointed out that students needing support most urgently may be uncomfortable seeking help in any form as help must be sought in English.

Lastly, there has been plenty of argument regarding who should take responsibility for assessing students' ELP; academic lecturers often do not feel that they have the time and/or expertise, and language support professionals feel that they are at a disadvantage from being unfamiliar with the discipline (Arkoudis, 2014). As a side note to all of these points, the ELP of students who speak English as a first language is rarely taken into consideration.

It is crucial that the issue of ELP is dealt with because successful language and literacy outcomes must be achieved for further study or for employment. To enable the students to achieve these outcomes, ELP must be incorporated into their learning in such a way that it is relevant to all students and integrated within disciplines. Currently, students are able to graduate from their course of study without meeting the threshold standards of ELP as in some courses it is assessed lightly, inconsistently or even not at all (Arkoudis, 2014). Thus, the focus has begun to shift from external language and learning support programs and entry tests to a more integrated approach to ELP.

### **Is there a second-order collective action dilemma?**

Academics are concerned about their students' communications skills, but do not believe they have the time and expertise to address these concerns within the disciplinary curriculum...ALL advisers have expertise in developing student's academic language and literacy, but developing collaborative approaches within disciplinary curricula is often hit and miss (Arkoudis, 2014, p. 12).

While the language and learning community is aware of the reasons for resistance from academics to embedded ELP strategies, they have paid too little attention to the core dilemma facing academics. Generally, instructors will not know the level of language competence of students on entry or exit. Australian universities generally do not measure English language competencies on exit and there are a number of pathways for international students to enrol at university without meeting the same English level standards of those directly enrolling offshore, including secondary schools, non-award courses, vocational educational training (VET) courses or English Language Intensive Course for Overseas Students (ELICOS) (Birrell, 2007; Murray & Arkoudis, 2013). Therefore, while academics can measure the opportunity cost of time and resources devoted to language development, the rewards they can expect for their efforts are very uncertain. This makes it difficult for academics to commit to collaboration with language specialists and learning advisors.

At the heart of the resistance appears to be a collective action dilemma (Ostrom, 2000). Consider the payoffs of two instructors who run units over consecutive semesters. The level of language development that the second-semester instructor is able to achieve will depend on the contribution of the first-semester instructor. We assume that the students' language competency is measured on entry and exit of the two-semester course but not between semesters and instructors share the reward for their joint contribution to student language development equally. Assuming language competencies are measured on entry and exit allows us to define a collective payoff for the idealised two-semester course. However, these assumptions are far from reality, as discussed below.

There are four possible outcomes: both instructors may contribute to students' language development; one or the other contributes; or neither instructor contributes. The best outcome for both students and staff is when both instructors contribute to language development. The worst is when there is no contribution from either instructor. If instructors were to come to an agreement, it is always possible that one instructor can break the agreement without sanction because individual contributions are not measured. In this case, the instructor that breaks the agreement is able to profit from the efforts of the instructor that does make a contribution.

The outcome of this situation is that each instructor will rationally assume that the other will not contribute. In such a case, both will break the agreement and not cooperate. The likelihood of this outcome depends on the payoffs and costs of cooperation. While the individual contributions are not measured by the faculty, each teacher will know their personal costs, including the time that could otherwise have been spent on activities that do yield measurable outcomes, such as research.

The importance of measuring outcomes to incentives has been highlighted by Dill and Soo (2004). They argue that if market forces are to incentivise institutions to improve teaching and learning, there needs to be a measure of the value added *for each department*. While department members have repeated dealings with each other, a critical element for cooperation is missing; the outcome of cooperation is not measured. Without a measure of value added by an academic program, individual faculty members will allocate their time according to their individual costs and benefits. This is described by Dill (2005) as a collective action dilemma facing faculties of every university department.

The benefit of cooperating with other faculty members in the design and implementation of higher quality academic programs will therefore receive little or no value. By the same logic faculty members also have few incentives to invest time and effort in developing and maintaining measures of value-added by academic programs, as a consequence the decline or rise of academic standards in subject fields remains largely invisible to academic eyes. (Dill & Soo, 2004, p.17)

Cooperation is essential since the “student content learning and cognitive development is affected by the nature and sequence of their curricular experiences as well as by the extent to which the curriculum faculty are collectively involved and communicating with each other about the substance of teaching and the student’s education experience” (Dill & Soo, 2004, p.16). A second-order collective action dilemma is when there is a lack of “voluntary cooperation ...to generate the information necessary to judge whether further cooperation to solve the collective action dilemma is rational” (Dill, 2005).

By way of illustration, the recent requirement for the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) and Australian Skills Quality Authority (AQSA), to ensure a uniform measure of quality threshold English standards for all students (Murray & Arkoudis, 2013) may be seen as a response to a collective action dilemma at the institutional level. The situation leading to these reforms was described in the following terms,

To my knowledge very few universities confront the English language problem by requiring a formal English test and then mandating supplementary English courses for students who are deficient. There is widespread recognition of the English problem. *But if a particular university takes unilateral action to require remedial courses this would add to the fees the overseas students must pay and put the institution at a competitive disadvantage relative to the competition.* (Birrell, 2007, p.62-3, *emphasis added*)

The Assessment Tool addresses a collective action dilemma at the program level by measuring students’ English language development over the degree program in a manner that does not rely on the active engagement of academics.

### **How the assessment tool addresses the language development agenda**

The Assessment Tool involves the language and learning community taking the initiative in allaying concerns raised by academics in regard to time and space on the curriculum as well as expertise. It addresses each of the concerns directly. The academic is not involved in the assessment of assignments for language proficiency (the task of the language specialist) and the written or oral assessment is taken from the existing curriculum. This does not mean that academics do not involve themselves in improving the language proficiency of their students, but only that the Assessment Tool is not predicated on their involvement. Instead, the Assessment Tool relies on providing the right incentives for disciplinary staff to engage in supporting the language proficiency of their students.

A criticism of generic academic skills workshops is that they position the student as deficient and in need of remedial support; they have low attendance rates and those that do attend are those less in need of assistance. Students may avoid them even if they are compulsory because they view

them as a burden or an admission of failure (Dunworth, 2013). The Assessment Tool, in contrast, applies to all students; it is developmental, allowing all students to have their progression independently monitored and recognised.

Dunworth (2013) identifies five key themes which have emerged from recent literature on student English language development in higher education in Australia and overseas:

1. How should student language assessment and development be integrated into teaching and learning?
2. How should institutions measure and/or monitor student language development?
3. What are the implications of change for staff training and professional development?
4. To what extent should institutions take a holistic approach?
5. What are the key research priorities?

Answering the second question is critical for the first question. The Assessment Tool is an in-course approach to assessing English language development. Consequently, it provides a method of addressing the second-level collection action dilemma of measuring the contribution of instructors at each level of students' course progression. Once the measurement issue is resolved by having language specialists assess assignments for ELP, program managers can identify and reward the contribution of instructors at each level. These rewards, which can be reputational as well as financial, allow individual instructors to make a rational decision about the time they are prepared to devote to English language development. If the benefits of their contribution are recognised and remunerated, one would expect instructors to be willing to devote more time to English language development. Furthermore, those involved in the delivery of a program would be motivated to develop policies that address the program-specific needs and encourage individual instructors to develop and implement strategies for English language development. Individual instructors and program managers will have stronger incentives to collaborate with their language and learning colleagues to make student language development "a core teaching and learning issue and develop strategies for enhancing, assessing, monitoring and evaluating students' English language use" (Dunworth, 2013, p.66). Part of the collaboration would involve identifying areas where staff require professional development, which addresses the third question.

Finally, all students, whether they speak English as a first or additional language, are assessed for their ELP under the Assessment Tool. This allows each student to develop English language competencies to meet their personal long-term goals, given the need to meet minimum course standards set for each level of the program. This allows for diversity in student backgrounds, internationalisation of course programs and support that is tailored to the needs of students.

To conclude this section, the Assessment Tool involves a joint venture between the institution, language specialists, academics and the students. The institution has the primary responsibility to provide a framework for measuring student progression in ELP. Language specialists implement the ELP assessment, creating incentives for academic staff to contribute to the students' progression and generating a demand for the services of language and learning specialists. For the students, the knowledge that employers would be aware that they are graduates of an institution, or at least a program, that documents their students' language progression would provide additional motivation and commitment.

## **Pilot project**

The pilot project reported below implemented the first stage of the Assessment Tool. This involved evaluating the efficacy of the process and a marking rubric based the IELTS for written assessments.

The pilot project was conducted at Curtin University Sydney (CUS) during Trimester 2A 2015 (from July to October 2015). The methodology employed in the pilot project was as follows.

1. Particular Curtin Business School (CBS) academic units were selected, each of which required the submission of an individual written assessment by enrolled students.
2. The Project Leader visited each relevant class and sought the consent of students to participate in the pilot project.
3. On completing the written assessment, each participating student was provided with a Student Assessment Tool by the Project Leader to self-assess his or her ELP in his or her written work.
4. The students submitted their written assessments for marking by the Instructors together with an Originality/Turnitin report in the usual way.
5. The students provided a copy of their completed Assessment Tool to the Specialist, who visited the classes to collect them.
6. The Specialist obtained copies of the students' written assignments from the Instructors and assessed their ELP using the Specialist Assessment Tool.
7. Subsequently the Specialist provided each student with a copy of the relevant completed Assessment Tool, enabling the student to compare the Specialist's assessment of his or her ELP with the student's own self-assessment of that ELP.
8. The Specialist returned to the classes and provided the students with surveys at the end of the trimester in order to gauge the usefulness and ease of the Assessment Tool and process as rated by the students.
9. The Project Leader then analysed the results of the ELP assessments and the surveys.

The selected units and written assessments for the Pilot Project were as follows:

- ECON1000 Introductory Economics: Essay (20%)
- BLAW1004 Business Law: Assignment One (20%)
- POLS6000 Contemporary Governance: Portfolio Proposal (20%)

Note that the marking rubric is not discipline-specific: it is capable of being applied in a wide variety of academic contexts. Although it is specifically designed for any assignment which requires essay-style writing, the rubric could also be applied to reports, case studies and 'question/answer' type assessments. However, we consider that the rubric will work best for essays, because reports, for example, require a particular structure which would need to be specifically addressed in the assessment criteria.

## **Findings and discussion**

In this section we report the results of the ELP assessment and self-assessment, as well as the student's evaluation of the exercise.

The marking rubric, loosely based on the IELTS writing assessment criteria, consisted of three categories of items (or constructs) designed to measure coherence and cohesion (25), lexical resource (20) and grammatical range and accuracy (20) for an aggregate mark out of 65. In addition to the specialist’s assessment, the rubric was used by students to self-assess their ELP. Table 1 provides summary statistics for the two assessments in terms of the overall assessment and the individual components.

**Table 1: ELP scores & accuracy of ELP self-assessment**

<i>N</i> =23	<b>Total score (max 65)</b>	<b>Coherence &amp; cohesion (max 25)</b>	<b>Lexical resource (max 20)</b>	<b>Grammatical range &amp; accuracy (max 20)</b>
Assessment: Ave (St. Dev)	40.91 (7.954)	18.09 (4.709)	12.13 (3.217)	8.39 (3.381)
Self-Assessment: Ave (St. Dev)	42.30 (9.192)	17.22 (3.655)	9.79 (3.415)	12.96 (3.574)
p-values for Shapiro-Wilk Test on Differences	.956	.103	.185	.666
Ave. Differences (Self-Assess. <i>Less</i> Assess).	1.391	-.870	-2.345	4.565
95% CI	[-1.998, 4.781]	[-2.673, .934]	[-4.01, -.685]	[2.960, 6.179]
t-value (p-value) (df =22)	.851 (.404)	-1.000 (.328)	-2.929 (.008)	5.893 (.000)

To test the student’s ability to assess their own ELP, a paired-samples t-test was used to determine whether there was a statistically significant difference between each student’s assessment and that of the language specialist. The Shapiro-Wilk’s test for normality was applied to the differences and the assumption of normality could not be rejected for all four sets of differences. Both the *t*-tests and the confidence intervals are reported.

Three students completed the self-assessment twice because they were enrolled in two of the units sampled and so two distinct assignments were graded. For the purposes of the accuracy of their self-assessments the marks were averaged. However, no adjustment was made to the standard errors and confidence intervals. This means the standard errors should be lower and confidence intervals narrower than the unadjusted values reported above.

While students are able to accurately assess themselves overall, they significantly under-estimate their lexical resources while significantly over-estimating their grammatical range and accuracy. Paired samples tests for each construct indicated found the prediction error to be statistically significant and negative for lexical resource, and statistically significant and positive for grammatical range and accuracy.

In terms of the total score, the students’ self-assessment aligns with the specialist’s assessment, with differences found to be statistically insignificant. However, there are statistically significant differences in the components indicating that the students sampled tended to under-estimate their lexical resources while over-estimating their grammatical range and accuracy.

The student evaluation survey results for each of the five questions are reported in Table 2. Beginning with Item 1, 13 of the 15 students sampled agreed or strongly agreed that they were

more aware of how their English language ability affects their assignment after the study. Responses to item 2 indicate that 11 out of 15 students (73.4 per cent) liked being able to assess their own English ability.

The number of students who felt that it was important having their English language ability assessed in their assignment (Item 3) was 12, or 80 per cent, of the 15 students sampled. The fact that students found value in using their assignments to assess their ELP is encouraging.

The number of students who found the Assessment Tool easy to use and understand was 11 out of 15 students (73.4 per cent). Finally, the response to Item 5 indicates 13 out of 15 students agreed that it was important for them to improve their English writing skills.

As for the costs, it is estimated that it takes an hour to mark four assignments using the marking guide (about 20 minutes each). This is based on an approximate length of 2000 words.

**Table 2: Student evaluations**

<b>1) After this study, I am more aware of how my English language ability affects my assignment</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>	<b>Cumulative Percent</b>
Strongly Disagree	1	6.7	6.7
Disagree	0	0	6.7
Unsure	1	6.7	13.3
Agree	8	43.3	66.7
Strongly Agree	5	33.3	100
<i>Total</i>	<i>15</i>	<i>100</i>	
<b>2) I like being able to assess my own English ability</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>	<b>Cumulative Percent</b>
Strongly Disagree	1	6.7	6.7
Disagree	0	0	6.7
Unsure	3	20.0	26.7
Agree	7	46.7	73.3
Strongly Agree	4	26.7	100
<i>Total</i>	<i>15</i>	<i>100</i>	
<b>3) I think it's important that my English language ability is assessed in my assignment</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>	<b>Cumulative Percent</b>
Strongly Disagree	1	6.7	6.7
Disagree	0	0	6.7
Unsure	2	8.7	20.0
Agree	7	46.7	66.7
Strongly Agree	5	33.3	100
<i>Total</i>	<i>15</i>	<i>100</i>	

<b>4) The marking guide I was given to assess my assignment was easy to use and understand.</b>	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Strongly Disagree	0	0	0
Disagree	0	0	0
Unsure	4	26.7	26.7
Agree	8	53.3	80.0
Strongly Agree	3	20.0	100
<i>Total</i>	<i>15</i>	<i>100</i>	
<b>5) It is important to me to improve my English writing skills.</b>	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Strongly Disagree	1	6.7	6.7
Disagree	0	0	6.7
Unsure	1	6.7	13.3
Agree	5	33.3	46.7
Strongly Agree	8	53.3	100
Total	15	100	

### **Concluding remarks**

In this paper we proposed an Assessment Tool that is intended to give effect to Principles 5, 6 and 7 for Curriculum Design and Delivery outlined in the Good Practice Principles for English language proficiency for international students in Australian universities (AUQA, 2009). These principles call for recognition of the importance ELP and communication skills as graduate attributes, a developmental, embedded approach providing “ongoing opportunities for self-assessment”.

The aim of the Assessment Tool is to provide a measure of the ELP development and in doing so provide students and academic staff with a means of measuring progress in English language development over the degree program. The rationale for this approach is the assumption that a collective action dilemma underpins the resistance of disciplinary academics to initiatives that effectively implement the Good Practice Principles.

Preliminary results of a pilot indicated that the exercise was considered formative and thus has the potential to support ongoing improvements. Implementation of the assessment did not require any additional time on the part of the student or the tutor. The bare-bones procedure involved digital copies being sent to the ELP specialist for assessment of ELP. Self-assessment is an add-on or optional feature which, in practice (i.e., outside experimental conditions) could be implemented by the tutor to encourage students to reflect on their ELP. Students benefit by testing their own assessment against that of an expert and identifying for themselves areas where improvement can be made. A more challenging exercise might be a double-blind assessment of another student’s assignment (i.e. peer assessment).

A high proportion of students felt it was important having their assignment assessed for ELP. This is consistent with findings of Harris and Ashton (2011) who report an overwhelmingly

positive response by students to efforts to integrate and embed language skills into the curriculum of core MBA unit.

However, the program implemented by Harris and Ashton involved a learning advisor devoting significant time to curriculum design, instruction and assessment for a core MBA unit. The concentration of responsibility on both the learning advisor and a single unit is inconsistent with the notion of responsibility being “distributed according to the professional responsibilities of key people involved in teaching and learning” (Arkoudis, 2014, p. 12). In particular, there is no reason why the unit in which poor ELP is most manifest should bear the full burden of improving student ELP.

With the teaching and learning leaders setting the thresholds for oral and written communication skills (Arkoudis, 2014, p. 12), an essential condition for engaging academics is to measure student progress over their course career. This requires a uniform standard, and for basic written and oral communication skills this can be achieved with a language specialist assessing existing assignments. A collective response would involve course coordinators, teaching academics and learning advisors agreeing on the units in which specific communications skills are to be taught and the units in which these are assessed, along with the type of assessments that would best serve the development of communication skills. This would be more likely if the progress of students is independently measured against a uniform standard.

The strategy underlying the project has two sequential stages.

1. Writing assignments are taken from selected units over the course of the student’s degree and evaluated for their written communication skills.
2. The assessments and feedback are stored on the university’s learning management system for easy access by students, their teachers and learning skills advisors.

The results of the pilot project relate to the first stage. The next stage will be to return to students in our current sample and ask them to repeat the exercise. Their average scores and ability to self-assess can then be compared to other students in the same unit to test whether benchmarking against a previous ELP assessment can make a significant difference to ELP across semesters.

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