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# Using PELA to Predict International Business Students' English Writing Performance with Contextualised English Writing Workshops as Intervention Program

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# Using PELA to Predict International Business Students' English Writing Performance with Contextualised English Writing Workshops as Intervention Program

**Abstract**
This study examines the effectiveness of Post-Entry English Language Assessment (PELA) as a predictor of international business students' English writing performance and academic performance. An intervention involving the implementation of contextualised English writing workshops was embedded in a specific business subject targeted at students who performed poorly on the PELA. The results reveal that PELA is a better predictor of students' English writing performance and academic performance than their own perceptions of their English language skills, and the contextualised English writing workshops proved to be a worthwhile intervention. Students with low scores on the PELA showed significant improvement in their overall academic performance in the subject after the intervention. This improvement was reflected in their score on a major written assignment (English writing performance) and their final grade for the subject (academic performance). Moreover, students' perceptions captured through a focus group interview and an online survey indicated a positive correlation between the intervention program and learning outcomes. The implications of this study underscore the need for regular university wide implementation of a PELA to determine students' English writing proficiency and to align English writing workshops with tutorial and assessment activities as a pedagogic response to PELA outcomes. This approach will help students improve not only their English writing skills but also their overall academic performance.

**Keywords**
PELA (Post-Entry English Language Assessment), contextualised English writing workshops, English writing performance, academic performance

**Cover Page Footnote**
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## Introduction

The internationalisation of education since the early 1990s has resulted in some difficult challenges, one of which is the lack of English-language proficiency among students from non-English-speaking backgrounds (NESB) who are working towards their university degrees. Inadequate English-language proficiency has been cited as a pressing issue because it affects these students' ability to succeed academically (Harris 2013; Sherry, Thomas & Chui 2010; Smith & Khawaja 2011). Tatzl (2011) reports that international students immersed in English-medium universities may need dedicated measures to support them, such as reducing student workload and introducing "English for specific purposes" (ESP) activities. In the context of writing English, Namvar and Ibrahim (2014) state that NESB students are heavily influenced by their primary language (L1), and as a result, they may produce odd or problematic collocations, which pose some academic and assessment problems. Understanding students' cultural backgrounds and specific needs can help in terms of creating English intervention activities not only tailored to their needs but also directed toward augmenting their English-language capabilities to meet academic demands (Hu 2014; Mukminin & McMahon 2013; Ohnishi & Ford 2015; Rutledge & Cannata 2016; Tomlinson & Jarvis 2014). Research has indicated that English-language proficiency significantly influences students' metacognitive efforts, particularly when engaging in classroom tasks (Smith & Khawaja 2011; Zhao, Kuh & Carini 2005), as well as when coping with academic rigours in general (Ferris 2006; Martirosyan, Hwang & Wanjohi 2015; Sadeghi, Kashanian, Maleki & Haghdoost 2013).

Efforts to address a lack of English-language proficiency include the implementation of English-language assessments in universities – one of which is the Post-Entry English Language Assessment (PELA). As of 2011, PELA had been implemented in 65% of all Australian universities (Barthel 2011; Harris 2013; Knoch & Elder 2013; Moore 2012). The assessment is intended to identify students who may require English-language support and to help determine the aspects or dimensions of English language for particular intervention (Knoch & Elder 2013; Read & von Randow 2013). However, there is ongoing debate about the effectiveness of PELA in addressing students' language needs (Moore 2012; Knoch & Elder 2013; Read 2015). Although PELA has gained some support through campus-wide implementation in some Australian universities (Dunworth 2009; Ransom 2009), the need to link PELA outcomes with effective English-language skills programs continues to receive astute criticisms from experts (Read 2015). To ensure that students receive the relevant English-language support they need to achieve expected academic-learning outcomes, PELA must meet the threshold standards set by the university system as a whole, and it must do so in concordance with suggested guidelines from legitimate governing bodies, such as the Tertiary Education Quality Standards Agency (TEQSA) (Harris 2013; Palmer, Levett-Jones, Smith & McMillan 2014; TEQSA 2011; Tynan & Johns 2015).

## Literature review

International students must achieve a certain score on standardised English language tests, such as the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) and the International English Language Testing System (IELTS), to demonstrate a minimum level of English-language competency necessary for their university education. However, their minimum score may not accurately reflect their actual English-language ability (Tannenbaum & Wylie 2008). In a study by Hill, Storch and Lynch (2001), neither the TOEFL nor the IELTS was an accurate predictor of academic success. Indeed, it is not unusual for international students to still face significant language barriers in their

university studies even if they score satisfactorily on these standardised tests (Condrey & Derico 2012).

Driven by the "Good Practice Principles", the TEQSA Act 2011 and TEQSA's Quality Assessment on English Language Proficiency (Harris 2013; TEQSA 2013; Tynan & Johns 2015), several higher-education institutions in Australia have implemented PELA since the early 2000s (Harris 2013) as an alternative tool to detect students' English competency after admission. Some studies show that PELA provides an effective assessment of students' language abilities as they begin their university education. From the students' perspective, PELA results can help them acknowledge and become more aware of their language difficulties. They can use this objective assessment to proactively identify effective ways to improve their language skills and learning – for example, by attending English-language workshops (Dunworth 2009; Moore 2012). From the universities' perspective, PELA can help identify, early on, the students who may be at a greater risk of failure due to weak language skills, so that they can be directed to the university's support mechanisms, such as writing-support centres (Murray 2011). For example, Edith Cowan University in Australia has adopted a university-wide PELA with dual aims: to identify those who may require support with English-language proficiency and to provide effective academic-writing support when necessary (Harris 2013).

However, as noted above, some studies have shown that PELA poses some challenges that, when unnoticed or ignored, might eventually defeat its purpose. As a result, there remains some significant debate on its overall effectiveness. Many PELAs are specifically created by universities to accommodate their unique contexts, but their effectiveness in predicting students' language skills is still challenged (Moore 2012). If diagnostic language testing is disjointed from classroom pedagogy, the learning process, the learning situation and the learners' needs, it could lead to potentially negative results, and could ultimately disadvantage, demotivate and frustrate students (Cerezo & Amengual 2013). Many Australian PELAs, unlike the high-stakes English tests (e.g., IELTS, TOEFL, IGCSE) used for university selection, are developed in-house and are "seldom professionally validated" (Knoch & Elder 2013, p. 49).

Another concern is whether poor PELA outcomes are matched with effective English-language skills programs to complete the learning loop. Despite trying to provide various English-support programs to address the needs revealed through students' PELA results, universities widely report that students often ignore faculty-chosen support programs. There seems to be high resistance among students and teaching staff against compliance with PELA in some universities (Ransom, 2009). Ransom (2009) also argues that, as with many English-support programs that do not award students credit, attendance is not guaranteed and often decreases over time. Bright and von Randow (2004, p.2) note that advice regarding language support after PELA is often disregarded, and students' responses are "sporadic and unfocused, and unlikely to address their real needs", with lack of time, intense workload and information overload being crucial reasons. There are also instances in which NESB students have an inflated perception of their English-language skills (Delgado, Guerrero, Goggin & Ellis 1999). This incorrect self-appraisal of one's skills is problematic because of its subjective nature – that is, it can be a "random product of deficient self-knowledge" as well as "a systematic bias due to self-impression and emotion" (Assor & Connell 2009, p.25). Bright and von Randow (2004) and Ransom, Larcombe and Baik (2005) note an expectation gap: students expect that the teacher or the department will provide direction and support; for example, through extensive comments on their language use and suggestions on how to improve their written assignments. Some of these students develop a biased assumption that teachers will be there when they need a quick fix with some of their language problems in their written assignments, but neither teachers of a specific subject nor faculty members of a department

can be expected to take on the dual role of subject matter expert *and* English-language instructor (Delante 2016).

If students do not avail themselves of the English-language support offered by their university, these allocated resources are misplaced, if not wasted (Ransom 2009). As a result, it is imperative to find an effective way to engage students in the English-language support programs that universities offer after PELA results are analysed and problem areas are identified.

Integrating English-language workshops in some generic but core courses or modules emerges as one potentially effective way. For example, the University of Kent (2013) posits that combining business administration with English-language skills gives students a key understanding of the business world, along with a better understanding of the mechanics of language, the tool that facilitates communication in that world. Therefore, there is an opportunity to custom-design business courses with an English-language skills program to facilitate discussion and written exercises about business issues using comprehensible, well-written English. However, such an approach has not yet been systematically designed or embedded in a sufficient number of university programs because of high resistance, low compliance and conflicting perspectives among faculty members (Read 2015; Ransom 2009).

## Research context

### *PELA in JCU Singapore*

Since 2012, PELA has been mandatory for commencing first-year, first-trimester students at James Cook University (JCU) in Singapore. The assessment is embedded in an online survey called Post-Entry Skills Survey, or PESS[1] (JCU Singapore 2016). JCU Singapore implemented this assessment because more than 70% of international business students come from NESB (JCU Cognos data 2015), and a considerable number of them struggle with their English in classroom tasks (e.g., writing assignments). Similar to many international NESB students, they seem to lack the language skills necessary for effective participation in their courses (Harris 2013). Moreover, the implementation of PELA in JCU Singapore is in accordance with the TEQSA (2013) requirement to gauge students' English-language skills as they commence their university education.

The PELA in JCU Singapore is an English writing assessment (Appendix A) in which students are asked to write a paragraph in response to a writing prompt. They have approximately 30 minutes to complete the task. The PELA exercise requires between five and 10 sentences, and includes a suggested writing structure: a topic sentence, supporting details/evidence and a concluding sentence. Learning advisors mark the students' PELA paragraphs according to three band scores: adequate English writing performance/pass (3), borderline (2) and poor English writing performance/fail (1).

### *Contextualised English writing workshops in a business subject*

JCU Singapore has introduced an English-language intervention program. On the basis of PELA results, students assessed to have difficulty writing English are assigned to contextualised English

[1]PESS (with PELA embedded within it) is mandatory at JCU Singapore, as agreed and approved by the university's academic-compliance committee. This compulsory component superseded requesting students for their consent in using their PELA scores. Ethics was approved by the university's research committee in the use of students' PESS and PELA data in 2015.

writing workshops that are embedded in an introductory business class (BU1104: Business, Environment and Society in the Tropics) that first-year, first-trimester business students must undertake as they commence their undergraduate business degree. The goal is twofold: (1) to ensure that students with poor PELA performance directly participate in the contextualised English writing workshops; and (2) to determine whether there is evidence of improvement in their writing performance after the intervention. One major assessment in the course is to write a paragraph in response to a video case. Compared with dedicated and more-general English-language workshops, the contextualised English writing workshops are tailored to the major writing task in the subject, and thus are relevant to the subject's learning outcomes; this more directly coincides with PELA's intent to identify students' English-language problems early on so that they can participate in a language intervention (e.g., English writing workshops) for their own benefit. The common denominator between the PELA and the subject-specific written requirement, regardless of topic, is paragraph writing.

To reduce both teacher and researcher bias, learning advisors were tasked with conducting four contextualised English writing workshops (Table 1) in the second trimester of 2015, rather than the workshops being delivered by the subject lecturer or tutor (who is one of the researchers in this study). Learning advisors in JCU Singapore are tasked with providing literacy (English language) and numeracy (mathematics and statistics) support to students (JCU Singapore 2016).

**Table 1: Contextualised English writing workshops**

| Week in the Trimester | Workshop Topic |
|---|---|
| Week 2 | Paragraph Writing 1 |
| Week 5 | Paragraph Writing 2 |
| Week 7 | APA Citation and Referencing |
| Week 8 | Writing Assistance on Assignment Drafts |

These workshops cover the fundamentals of academic writing to help students express their ideas logically and coherently in the weekly tutorial case-study analysis and in the major written assignment (i.e., paragraph writing based on a video case). The range of writing aspects covered in the workshops include writing a topic sentence with a clear idea or argument, providing supporting details based on evidence and relevant theories about the video case and writing a concluding sentence. The advisors also review the use of active voice in writing, proper words and transitions, correct grammar and verb tense; employing a writing style or technique; writing in clear, concise and complete sentences; paraphrasing and summarising; and following APA citation and reference style. The topics covered in these contextualised English writing workshops appropriately reflect the writing criteria assessed in the PELA.

### *Research questions*

Given the challenges of ensuring that NESB students have the appropriate English skills to engage at a sufficient level with their classes, and taking into consideration the ongoing debate about the effectiveness of PELAs, this study aims to answer the following questions:

1. How effective is PELA as a tool to predict students' academic performance?
2. How effective are contextualised English writing workshops in improving students' academic performance after they take the PELA?

## Methodology

This study was undertaken at JCU Singapore with first-year, first-trimester international business students enrolled in BU1104 (Business, Environment and Society in the Tropics) during the first and second trimesters of 2015. In both trimesters, students' PELA results were obtained from JCU Singapore's Qualtrics database[2] and their BU1104 academic performance (their grade for the subject) was obtained from the examinations department of JCU Singapore.

In the first trimester of 2015, the contextualised workshops were not offered; they were offered for the first time in the second trimester of 2015. Students who scored 1 (fail) on the PELA were not subjected to a highly experimental condition; rather, a writing intervention was implemented: contextualised English writing workshops were embedded in BU1104 tutorial sessions, which targeted students with poor PELA performance.

To support the quantitative data gathered, at the end of the second trimester of 2015, an online survey was conducted with the rest of the BU1104 class, which sought students' opinions about or perceptions of the relevance, effectiveness and impact of the contextualised English writing workshops in improving their writing performance. A focus-group interview[3] (FGI) was also conducted with 15 students enrolled in the subject. Similar to the survey's purpose, the FGI was intended to solicit students' opinions about and perceptions of the relevance, effectiveness and impact of contextualised English writing workshops on their writing skills. To reduce researcher bias, a research assistant was asked to conduct the online survey, facilitate the interview and transcribe the audio-recorded interview script.

### *Variables of the study*

**Dependent variable.** Students' academic performance in the BU1104 class was the dependent variable in this study. We employed two measures: students' score on their major written assignment (a paragraph in response to a video case) and their overall grade for the subject.

**Independent variable: PELA score.** The PELA score was one of the main variables of interest, as we expected the PELA score to effectively predict students' academic writing performance. As mentioned, to get the PELA score, the PELA paragraphs written by students were assessed by learning advisors according to three band scores: adequate English writing performance (3), borderline performance (2) and poor performance (1).

**Workshop.** To test the effectiveness of the intervention program in closing the PELA diagnostic loop and enhancing students' academic performance, we chose two trimesters: the first and second trimesters of 2015. We did this because the contextualised English workshops were delivered in the second trimester of 2015, but not in the first. Thus, students in the second trimester became the treated group, while students in the first trimester served as the control group. A dummy variable indicated if a student was in the treated group (coded as 1) or the control group (coded as 0).

[2] Qualtrics is the survey platform that JCU Singapore uses to conduct the online survey and PELA at the beginning of each trimester.

[3] We obtained informed consent from students who participated in the FGI and the online survey. Both were voluntary.

**Other variables.** To filter the impact of other variables, we subjected them to controls. We controlled for whether students were *keen to learn* by asking them to rate whether they were keen to study with a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree).

We also controlled for two variables indicating students' reasons to attend the university. Parents typically have more authority in steering students towards a certain university, course and even career (Connor, Tyers, Modood & Hillage 2004). When this is the case, students may not have the same motivation and spontaneity in their learning and thus may perform below expectations. Therefore, we controlled for a variable we refer to as s*tudy for family* by asking students to report their agreement with the statement that they studied for their family using a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree), with a higher value indicating that the student was more likely to be studying for his or her family and thus might take less initiative in studying. Studies also suggest that career orientation is a predictor of students' academic performance (Himelstein 1992). Thus, we controlled for the variable *career goal* by asking students if they had a career goal (1 = yes, 0 = no).

Student effort and commitment have also been found to be a predictor of academic performance (Killen 1994; Tinto 1993), so we used the variable *perceived effort in prior studies* to proxy for student effort by asking students to rate on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree) the extent to which they agreed with the statement that they had worked hard before they came to university, with a higher value indicating that the student had exerted more effort in his or her prior studies.

Having accurate expectations of university studies may have considerable benefit for students' academic performance. To account for this, we controlled for *perceived challenge*, in line with prior research (Blascovich & Tomaka 1996). Students rated on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree) whether they agreed with a statement that study is easy. This variable was reverse coded. We also controlled for the variable *understanding university study* by asking students to rate on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree) whether they agreed with the statement that they understood university studies. Table 2 provides descriptive statistics and a correlation matrix.

**Table 2. Descriptive statistics and correlation matrix**

| Variables | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Academic performance | 1 | | | | | | | | | |
| 2. Written performance | 0.69* | 1 | | | | | | | | |
| 3. PELA | **0.33*** | **0.14*** | 1 | | | | | | | |
| 4. Keen to learn | -0.09 | -0.21* | -0.06 | 1 | | | | | | |
| 5. Perceived challenge | 0.13* | 0.22* | 0.05 | -0.49* | 1 | | | | | |
| 6. Study for family | -0.12 | -0.13 | -0.16* | 0.14* | -0.06 | 1 | | | | |
| 7. Understand university study | -0.12 | -0.26* | -0.14* | 0.77* | -0.46* | 0.21* | 1 | | | |
| 8. Perceived effort in prior studies | 0.05 | -0.12 | -0.11 | 0.53* | -0.20* | 0.39* | 0.48* | 1 | | |
| 9. Career goal | -0.01 | 0.01 | 0.02 | -0.07 | 0.10 | -0.12 | -0.05 | 0.00 | 1 | |
| 10. Tutor 2 | 0.09 | 0.17* | 0.12* | -0.34* | 0.19* | 0.02 | -0.36* | -0.08 | 0.05 | 1 |
| Mean | 65.35 | 2.48 | 1.94 | 2.83 | 3.23 | 2.60 | 2.77 | 2.80 | 1.35 | 0.30 |
| Standard Deviation | 13.02 | 0.67 | 0.70 | 1.08 | 0.94 | 1.10 | 1.07 | 1.04 | 0.48 | 0.46 |

## Quantitative analysis

***1. How effective is PELA as a tool to predict students' academic performance?***

To investigate the effectiveness of PELA in evaluating students' English writing performance, we conducted two sets of tests. First, we used t-tests to check the correlation between the PELA score and two variables: total score for the BU1104 class and the written assignment score. As mentioned in this paper's literature review, English proficiency plays a crucial role for international students – especially those whose first language is not English – in completing their studies in English-medium institutions (Li, Chen & Duanmu 2010; Martirosyan, Hwang & Wanjohi 2015). If PELA is an effective tool for reflecting students' English writing performance, there should be a correlation between students' PELA score and their academic performance. In our study, PELA scores were moderately, but positively, correlated with students' academic performance and written performance, with correlation coefficients of 0.33 and 0.14, respectively (Table 2)[4]. These results confirm the effectiveness of PELA for evaluating students' English writing performance.

Second, to further examine the correlation between PELA results and academic performance, we regressed academic performance (total score in the BU1104 class and score on the written assignment) on the PELA score and other control variables. The results appear in the Model 1 and Model 2 columns of Table 3. We still found significant results for PELA ($\beta = 6.48$, $p < 0.001$; $\beta = 0.13$, $p < 0.05$), even after we controlled other factors that could influence academic performance, thus confirming that PELA is a good predictor of students' English writing performance in the business subject.

**Table 3: Is PELA a good predictor of English language performance and academic performance?**

| | **Dependent Variable: Total Score** | **Dependent Variable: Written Assessment Score** |
|---|---|---|
| | **Model 1** | **Model 2** |
| PELA | **6.48*** ** | **0.13+** |
| | **(1.58)** | **(0.07)** |
| Keen to learn | -1.49 | -0.05 |
| | (1.9) | (0.09) |
| Perceived challenge | 3.32* | 0.11 |
| | (1.55) | (0.07) |
| Study for family | -1.03 | -0.02 |
| | (1.23) | (0.06) |
| Understand university study | 0.90 | -0.03 |
| | (1.79) | (0.08) |
| Perceived effort in prior studies | 2.78+ | 0.02 |
| | (1.44) | (0.06) |
| Career goal | -2.50 | -0.11 |
| | (2.45) | (0.11) |

[4] When studying things that are difficult to measure, such as the subjective rating of a student's English skills, correlation coefficients are expected to be lower.

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Tutor 2 | 0.87 | 0.15 |
| | (2.82) | (0.13) |
| Constant | 41.24*** | 2.21*** |
| | (9.58) | (0.44) |
| R-squared | 0.20 | 0.13 |

+$p < 0.1$, *$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$, ***$p < 0.001$.

### *2. How effective are contextualised English writing workshops in improving students' academic performance after they take the PELA?*

To determine whether the contextualised English writing workshops influenced students' English writing performance and academic performance, we regressed academic performance (measured as the total grade in the BU1104 class [Models 3 to 5] and the score in the written assignment [Models 6 to 8]; Table 4) of students who took part in the workshops. Note that the main effect of the contextualised English writing workshops was not significant in Models 3 and 6. However, in Models 4 and 7, the interaction between the contextualised English writing workshops and the PELA score was negatively significant ($\beta = –7.13$, $p < 0.1$; $\beta = –0.31$, $p < 0.1$), while the main effect of workshops was positively significant ($\beta = 7.74$, $p < 0.1$; $\beta = 0.49$, $p < 0.1$). These results suggest that the workshops might be beneficial only for the students with lower PELA scores – that is, those with weaker English skills. These students might have understood the importance of the contextualised English writing workshops and thus were motivated to learn some necessary English-language skills.

**Table 4: Do contextualised English writing workshops help improve students' academic performance? (N = 126)**

| | **Dependent Variable: Total Score** | | | **Dependent Variable: Written Assessment Score** | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | **Model 3** | **Model 4** | **Model 5** | **Model 6** | **Model 7** | **Model 8** |
| Study for family × workshop | | | 2.35 | | | -0.04 |
| | | | (1.36) | | | (0.11) |
| Keen to learn × workshop | | | **2.32+** | | | -0.24 |
| | | | **(0.57)** | | | (0.19) |
| Workshop × career | | | **5.99+** | | | **0.51*** |
| | | | **(1.98)** | | | **(0.23)** |
| Workshop × PELA score | | **-7.13+** | **-6.57** | | **-0.31+** | **-0.35+** |
| | | **(3.98)** | **(6.83)** | | **(0.18)** | **(0.19)** |
| Workshop | -4.29 | **7.74+** | -16.49 | -0.03 | **0.49+** | -1.06 |
| | (5.91) | **(8.91)** | (6.96) | (0.27) | **(0.4)** | (0.86) |
| PELA score | 6.47*** | 11.84** | 11.15 | 0.13+ | 0.37* | 0.41* |
| | (1.58) | (3.39) | (6.38) | (0.07) | (0.15) | (0.17) |
| Keen to learn | -2.21 | -2.89 | -4.38* | -0.06 | -0.09 | -0.23 |
| | (2.15) | (2.16) | (0.6) | (0.1) | (0.1) | (0.14) |
| Challenge | 3.15* | 3.34* | 3.28+ | 0.11 | 0.12 | 0.12 |
| | (1.57) | (1.56) | (0.95) | (0.07) | (0.07) | (0.07) |
| Study for family | -0.97 | -0.25 | -1.49 | -0.02 | 0.01 | -0.01 |
| | (1.23) | (1.28) | (0.74) | (0.06) | (0.06) | (0.08) |
| Understand university study | -0.21 | -0.23 | -0.93 | -0.03 | -0.03 | -0.08 |
| | (2.36) | (2.34) | (0.92) | (0.11) | (0.11) | (0.11) |
| Study hard before | 2.55+ | 2.83+ | 2.66 | 0.02 | 0.03 | 0.03 |
| | (1.47) | (1.47) | (0.97) | (0.07) | (0.07) | (0.07) |

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Career goal | 2.44 | -2.53 | 6.34+ | 0.11 | 0.12 | 0.46* |
| | (2.45) | (2.43) | (1.63) | (0.11) | (0.11) | (0.19) |
| Tutor 2 | 1.36 | 2.08 | 2.18 | 0.15 | 0.18 | 0.19 |
| | (2.91) | (2.91) | (2.27) | (0.13) | (0.13) | (0.13) |
| Constant | 47.90*** | 37.91** | 48.94 | 2.14*** | 1.70*** | 2.19* |
| | (13.91) | (14.93) | (9.32) | (0.62) | (0.68) | (0.86) |
| R-squared | 0.21 | 0.23 | 0.24 | 0.13 | 0.15 | 0.20 |

$+p < 0.1$, $*p < 0.05$, $**p < 0.01$, $***p < 0.001$.

Models 5 and 8 show that the interaction between contextualised English writing workshops and career goal was positively significant ($\beta = 5.99$, $p < 0.1$; $\beta = 0.51$, $p < 0.05$), while the main effect of the workshops was not significant. These results suggest that students who had a clear career goal benefitted more from the workshops than those without a career goal. This may be because students with career goals are generally more mature and have a higher level of intrinsic motivation to learn (Fazey & Fazey 2010; Kahu 2014; Richardson 2006); they seemed to show more eagerness to make the most out of the contextualised English writing workshops provided for them. In Model 5, the interaction between contextualised English writing workshops and the variable *keen to learn* was positively significant ($\beta = 2.32$, $p < 0.01$). This suggests that students with a higher motivation and interest to learn benefitted more from the workshops.

## Qualitative analysis

In our quantitative study, we showed that the contextualised English writing workshops helped improve students' academic performance, particularly those students with poor English writing skills. Yet we wanted to dig deeper to find how and why the contextualised workshops improved students' academic performance. Thus, we also conducted a qualitative analysis using an FGI and a survey questionnaire.

### *Results from the FGI*

The qualitative data captured through the FGI suggests that contextualised English writing workshops helped students improve their writing performance in their business subject. From the report generated through Leximancer[5], we selected the key concepts that were most often mentioned, indicating the effectiveness of the contextualised English writing workshops. Some of the common keywords included *learning*, *helpful*, *improve*, *useful*, *better*, *able* and *proper*. Table 5 breaks these down further. From these results, we can conclude that the students perceived the workshops as useful in improving their writing performance in particular, and their academic performance as a whole.

**Table 5: Key concepts and/or words ranked from Leximancer**

| | Concepts | Counts | Percentage |
|---|---|---|---|
| Are the workshops effective? | Learning | 95 | 79% |
| | Helpful/helped | 81 | 66% |
| | Improve | 43 | 36% |

[5] Leximancer is software that allows researchers to map themes, concepts and their associated relationships from a body of text. It is a concept-mining tool "offering objective, actionable insight in the form of visually compelling concept maps and dashboard reports" (Pacific Transcription 2016).

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Useful | 37 | 30% |
| | Better | 31 | 26% |
| | Able | 27 | 22% |
| In what way are the workshops helpful? | APA referencing/citation | 100 | 83% |
| | Assignments | 46 | 38% |
| | Case | 29 | 24% |
| | Structure | 25 | 21% |
| | Grammar | 19 | 16% |
| | Mistakes | 10 | 8% |
| | Plagiarism | 8 | 6% |
| | Writing style | 5 | 4% |

Note: There were 120 counts generated from Leximancer.

The writing skills that the students believed were enhanced included understanding APA referencing/citation, using correct grammar in writing, developing logical structure, understanding and avoiding plagiarism and developing an academic writing style. Some detailed feedback is provided here:

**APA referencing**

*"I was not really a master in writing, but after the workshops, my writing has improved. Now, I am able to do proper references in APA style."*– Post-PELA Survey

*"I am now able to apply academic techniques for my written assessments such as utilising APA referencing and citations. Assistance from these contextualised English writing workshops during my subject tutorials really enabled me to structure my sentences logically in conjunction to the topic. As a result, I feel that I am more capable of writing my assignments in academic format."* – FGI, Student 6

**Grammar and structure**

*"The writing workshops provided a conducive environment where we learned many ways about writing. Firstly, we dealt with incorrect grammar with the workshop facilitator helping us to write our assignment properly and to attend to grammar errors. Secondly, we improved the structure of our paragraph."*– Post-PELA Survey

**Plagiarism**

*"What I found difficult to understand in the beginning was what gets marked as plagiarism. After a while, I understood that plagiarism happens when I take something from the internet without citing the source. Rephrasing an idea and always referencing sources enables me to avoid plagiarism."* – FGI, Student 2

**Writing style**

*"The English writing workshops gave me a clear insight of what were demanded in terms of literacy in the business module and how to improve my writing assignments by integrating appropriate writing styles."*– Post-PELA Survey

This feedback suggests that students found the contextualised English writing workshops effective in improving their English writing competency.

Furthermore, Leximancer identified two key concepts related to the workshops: *assignments* and *case*. According to the students, the contextualised English writing workshops tailored to the video case paragraph-writing exercise and related writing tasks significantly enhanced their writing performance. Students even highlighted that the writing skills they acquired could be applied or transferred to other business-related writing assignments in other business subjects.

**Assignments**

*"These workshops helped me to do my assignments in various ways. I was able to understand the structure and language that I needed to use in writing my assignments."* – Post-PELA Survey

*"The English literacy workshops were useful because the guidelines and assistance given can be applied in my other writing assignments."* – Post-PELA Survey

*"It was great being in the workshops working on my English skills on both reading and writing. It helped me throughout the semester on many of my assignments in my subjects."* – Post-PELA Survey

**Case**

*"The English writing workshops conducted in tutorials have been a great aid in structuring my answers to case study questions and in applying the APA format to essay assignments. During this process, common errors in grammar and paragraph structure were pointed out and recommendations were made to improve our writing. This was especially true for a case study assignment where my group's answer was phrased wrongly with regard to tense use and cohesion in thesis statement. Therefore, I conclude that, as a whole, the outcome of contextualised English writing workshops has been very positive and enriching."* – Post-PELA Survey

*"In the workshops, I learned how to write well-written responses for a case study. I also learned about structure that is required for writing a short paragraph for the cases given. I learned that logic and evidence matter as well."* - Post-PELA Survey

### *Results from the online survey*

As a companion to the FGI, we designed an online survey with seven questions to collect more perceptions from students about the effectiveness of the contextualised English writing workshops in improving their learning. Thirty-seven students completed the survey, for a response rate of 23.3%. Similar to the FGI results, the survey results confirmed that the students perceived the contextualised English writing workshops as effective in improving their academic writing skills in terms of paragraph structure, organisation of ideas, clarity in conveying information and logical flow. The students also reported that the skills they learned from the workshops could be transferred to other subjects and other writing situations. Table 6 shows the students' high level of agreement with the seven survey items.

**Table 6: Students' opinion about the effectiveness of contextualised English writing workshops**

| Survey Items | Strongly Agree | Agree | Not Sure | Disagree | Strongly Disagree |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. The contextualised English writing workshops fulfilled the academic-writing skills expected of me in the course. | 4 | **19** | 9 | 4 | 1 |
| 2. The contextualised English writing workshops were useful in terms of improving my academic-writing skills. | 2 | **20** | 9 | 5 | 1 |
| 3. The contextualised English writing workshops were customised or tailored to the learning outcomes of the course. | 5 | **18** | 8 | 4 | 2 |
| 4. The contextualised English writing workshops helped me convey information clearly and fluently in written form appropriate for my written assignments in the course. | 5 | **17** | 9 | 5 | 1 |
| 5. The contextualised English writing workshops helped me convey information clearly and fluently in written form appropriate for my tutorial activities. | 2 | **19** | 10 | 5 | 1 |
| 6. The contextualised English writing workshops helped me improve the structure, organisation and logical flow of my written assignments. | 4 | **19** | 8 | 4 | 2 |
| 7. I have used or will use the language skills I learned from these contextualised English writing workshops in other subjects. | 6 | **16** | 8 | 5 | 2 |

## Conclusion

As internationalisation of education increases, many more students will leave their home countries and pursue an education in foreign countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia, where English is the main language of instruction. International students, especially those from an NESB, may experience difficulties understanding lectures, interacting with their classmates and professors and performing writing tasks due to a lack of English proficiency (Ramsay, Barker & Jones 1999; Selvadurai 1998). Thus, determining international students' entry-level English skills as they commence their university studies and providing them with contextualised English-language support are crucial for them to achieve academic success.

On the one hand, this study illuminates the debate about the effectiveness of using PELA to predict academic performance. Although PELA was already in practice in about one-third of Australian universities in 2009 (Dunworth 2009), its effectiveness has always been the subject of debate. As a result, until 2011, of the 38 Australian universities surveyed, nine (23%) were not using PELA; eight (21%) were not using PELA but were reviewing policies with a view to introducing PELA; and nine (23%) had small, faculty-based PELA initiatives (Elder 2011). Our results reveal that PELA can be a good predictor of students' English writing proficiency, represented by their score on a writing assignment and their overall grade in a business subject.

Our study thus adds value to the existing empirical evidence in support of using PELA to assess students' English-language proficiency.

On the other hand, this study provides evidence that contextualised English writing workshops are effective in helping students improve their writing skills and academic performance, particularly for international students whose first language is not English and who are facing a greater language barrier. Students who scored low on the PELA showed a significant improvement in their academic performance, as shown by their written assignment score and their final grade in the BU1104 class. We also found that students with a higher motivation to study and a clear career goal benefitted more from the workshops.

Our research has some important implications for teaching practice. We offer a feasible, efficient and effective follow-up strategy to address international students' need for English-language support – namely, providing contextualised English writing workshops. It is feasible and efficient in that no additional staff members are necessary to run a large-scale English course for international students in institutions in which budgets and additional hires are an issue. It is effective in that students do not need to make extra time to sit in additional learning programs and pay more money to do so. Lecturers or tutors can calibrate formative and summative assessment items with the delivery mode of tutorials and then invite fellow academic staff (in our case, learning advisors) to deliver brief but succinct workshops tailored to the subject requirements. Thus, with contextualised workshops, students will be more engaged in the learning process and achieve better outcomes.

We also acknowledge two limitations of this study. First, we only chose one trimester without workshops and one trimester with workshops to test the workshops' effectiveness. A longitudinal study over three to six trimesters would be more predictive of trends or patterns in students' writing and learning. Second, the workshop was only offered in one business subject. Future research could replicate this study in other different disciplines – for example, information technology – to determine whether contextualised English writing workshops have a similar impact on students' writing skills and academic performance. This approach may not be optimal for subjects that require fewer writing assignments.

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## Appendix A: PELA topic and rubrics for marking

Welcome to James Cook University Singapore! JCU Singapore wants to know more about you through completing this survey. Any data or information you provide will be used for purposes of giving you a better and meaningful study experience. Any data or information from you will be kept in Learning Support department's 'soft drive' and will be deleted within 2 years. Please complete this survey; then, in Section D, please write a paragraph as a Post-Entry English Language Assessment (PELA) task. The paragraph will help us understand what kind of language assistance you might need. For those of you who may not do well in the paragraph, you will be advised to attend some language and study skills workshops designed to equip you with necessary skills to achieve success in the university and beyond.

### *The structure of your paragraph*

- Start your paragraph with a topic sentence. Topic sentences tell readers what the paragraph is about.
- The sentences after the topic sentence provide ideas and information to support the topic sentence. You do not need to provide references.
- Use some connectors between sentences, such as 'First', 'However', 'As a result' and 'In conclusion'.
- End your paragraph with a concluding sentence. Concluding sentences summarise paragraphs and may also provide suggestions for using the information in the paragraph or predictions about the future.

### *Use academic language*

- No informal language, for example, avoid 'lots of' and 'gotta go'.
- Use complete words. No contractions (e.g., 'isn't') and no abbreviations (e.g., 'MRT').
- Avoid absolute words, such as 'always' and 'no one'.

### *Use academic writing style*

- Be precise: Avoid unnecessary words.
- Be logical: Ask yourself if your ideas fit together and if they make sense.

### *Edit your paragraph*

- Check your grammar: Do the verbs agree with the subjects of the sentences? Check your articles ('a', 'an' and 'the') and the prepositions (for example, 'in' 'on' and 'of').
- Check your punctuation (e.g., capital letters, full stops, commas and spaces).

### *PELA Scoring Rubric*

| | Exceeds Expectations | Meets Expectations | Approaches Expectations |
|---|---|---|---|
| **1. Answered the Question** | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| **2. Content**<br>Provided a range of relevant and appropriate information<br>**Topic Sentence:** Introduced the topic clearly<br>**Conclusion Sentence**: Summarised the paragraph | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| **3. Academic Writing Style**<br>Connections between sentences<br>Logical flow of ideas<br>Use of precise language | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| **4. Language Style**<br>An academic writing style avoiding slang, jargon, colloquialisms and clichés | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| **5. Grammar and Punctuation**<br>Effective use of punctuation<br>Correct grammar and consistent tense use | 1 | 2 | 3 |

### *PELA Scores*

- **Band 3 (Exceeds Expectations - Pass):** You appear to have adequate competence in written language. Thus, you are at low risk of failure due to written language/literacy.

- **Band 2 (Meets Expectations - Borderline):** You will benefit from focused help with written language to be more successful in your subjects. Thus, you are at possible risk of failure due to written language/literacy.

- **Band 1 (Approaches Expectations - Fail):** You do not appear to have the level of competence in written language that is required for success in your subjects. Thus, you are at high risk of failure due to written language/literacy.

### *PELA Writing Task*

Please write **one paragraph** (five to ten sentences) on the topic: ***How did your studies before you came to JCU Singapore prepare you for studying in JCU Singapore?***

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

## Appendix B: Survey questionnaire

### *A. Demographics*

Gender: _____Male _____Female

Age: _____

Year of study at university: _____

Course/Program of study: _____

Student category: _____ Local _____International

Country of origin: _____

Ethnic heritage

□ Caucasian/ white
□ African descent/ ancestry
□ Korean
□ Aborigine
□ Other: Please specify
_____

□ Malay
□ Indian
□ Middle Eastern
□ Torres Strait Islander

□ Chinese
□ Japanese
□ European
□ Pacific Islander

### *B. Survey Questionnaire*

**Directions**. Please tick the item that best suits your choice.

**1 = Strongly agree, 2 = Agree, 3 = Undecided, 4 = Disagree, 5 = Strongly disagree**

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | The contextualized English literacy workshops fulfilled the academic writing skills expected of me in the course. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 2 | The contextualized English literacy workshops were useful in terms of improving my academic writing skills. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 3 | The contextualized English literacy workshops were customized or tailored to the learning outcomes of the course. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 4 | The contextualized English literacy workshops helped me meet deadlines set for my writing assignments in the course. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 5 | The contextualized English literacy workshops helped me convey information clearly and fluently in written form appropriate for the learning outcomes of the course. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 6 | The contextualized English literacy workshops helped me improve the structure, organisation and logical flow of my writing. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 7 | The language skills I learned from the contextualized English literacy workshops can be transferred into other courses. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

## Appendix C: FGI questions

1. What did you think of the contextualized English writing support workshops conducted in your course? Did you have this kind of support before? How did it help you?

2. What did you learn from the various English writing support workshops (paragraph writing, assignment writing, APA referencing and EndNote, assisting with assignment drafts) embedded in your course?

3. Would you recommend that these contextualized English writing support workshops continue to be introduced to first year, first trimester students in at least one of their first year courses? If so, why?

4. Would you like to see any changes/modifications to any of these contextualized workshops? If so, what are these changes or modifications?

5. Are there any other things you wish to add or say?