



# **UNSW Learning and Teaching Grants and Fellowship Program**

## **Final Report**

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**English Language Acquisition Support for International Students (ELASIS)**

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## 1. Acknowledgements

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## 2. List of acronyms used

ELASIS = English Language Acquisition Support for International Students

IELTS = International English Language Testing System

PELE = Personalised English Language Enhancement

HUMS1005 = Course code for credit-bearing PELE version for undergraduate students

ARTS5505 = Course code for credit-bearing PELE version for postgraduate students

PA approach = Personalised Autonomous approach

## 3. Executive summary

At UNSW, more than 15,000 international students are studying across our eight faculties. They are valuable members of our diverse learning community and yet many of them are struggling in their studies due to a number of linguistic, cultural and/or emotional challenges that they are faced with. Various support and services have been provided to help them with such challenges. The linguistic challenge in particular has been identified as a major source of their struggle and various educational interventions have been implemented for their English language enhancement. However, there is substantial room for improvement to help and support international students who speak English as an additional language (e.g. 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, or even 4<sup>th</sup> language). Against this background, the English Language Acquisition Support for International Students (ELASIS) project was established in 2016.

The ELASIS project aimed to find an innovative solution to provide pedagogically sustainable support for international students' English language enhancement. It adopted a Personalised Autonomous (PA) approach in a co-curricular course named Personalised English Language Enhancement (PELE). The rationale for the new approach is that the one-size-fits-all approach does not work for advanced language users because they all have different areas of language they need to improve. As a solution, this project piloted PELE and evaluated its pedagogical efficacy. As a model of personalised autonomous language learning, PELE promotes a cyclical exploratory research approach to learning. Students are guided in analysing their linguistic needs and they are then provided with careful scaffolding in designing a personal project to address a specific need, implementing the project and reflecting on what they have learned through their personal project. Once equipped with the cyclical framework, students are then encouraged to carry out further cycles of language learning through self-study after completion of the PELE course. PELE is grounded in sociocultural theories of learning with an emphasis on the affective components of learning and developing student independence.

PELE was run as a co-curricular course in both semesters of 2016 with more than 500 students involved. They were enrolled in an undergraduate, postgraduate or HDR program across faculties at UNSW. Taking a mixed-methods approach, data were collected about student perceptions via course entry and exit surveys, focus groups, analysis of students' project portfolios created for the course and interviews with PELE tutors. Our main findings indicate that PELE was highly successful not only in enhancing students' English language skills, but also in developing their self-confidence, emotions about English, sense of belonging to UNSW, self-efficacy skills,

autonomous learning skills, and motivation to study. Students began to feel that they belonged to a community of learning, and this feeling was further enhanced in Semester 2, 2016, with the creation of social clubs for informal interaction outside of the lectures and tutorials. In addition, detailed diagnostic assessments were developed for Semester 2, 2016, to help students in the diagnosis of their language learning needs and goal-setting.

As a result of the project, PELE is now a fully designed face-to-face English language acquisition support course including learning resources, tutor/mentor training methods and resources, and evaluation and reporting measures and mechanisms. PELE started to be offered as a credit-bearing course for undergraduate (HUMS1005) and postgraduate students (ARTS5505) in Semester 1, 2017. We recommend that PELE continue as a credit-bearing course, and also that options for running PELE in co-curricular and blended learning modes be explored through future implementation and research.

#### 4. Key stakeholders

The key stakeholders were students across faculties, School of Humanities and Languages staff, and other key personnel in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences and UNSW more widely. Table 1 summarises how these stakeholders engaged in the project:

Table 1: Key stakeholders

Students (from across faculties)	School of Humanities and Languages	Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences / UNSW
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Expressed their interest in participating in PELE</li> <li>• Participated in the PELE course and completed their own personal projects</li> <li>• Engaged with the PELE community through social clubs and the learning festival</li> <li>• Completed course entry and exit surveys</li> <li>• Took part in focus groups and case study research</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Supported set-up of co-curricular PELE course</li> <li>• Project updates given at the School of Humanities and Languages staff meetings in 2016 and 2017</li> <li>• Group presentation given at the Humanities and Languages Research Forum, June 2016</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Supported PELE promotion activities</li> <li>• Meetings with the Steering Committee twice per semester</li> <li>• Presentation given at the Learning and Teaching Forum, October 2016</li> <li>• Presentation given at the Learning and Teaching Seminar, February 2017</li> </ul>

#### 5. Project aims, approach and evaluation

##### 5.1 Project aims

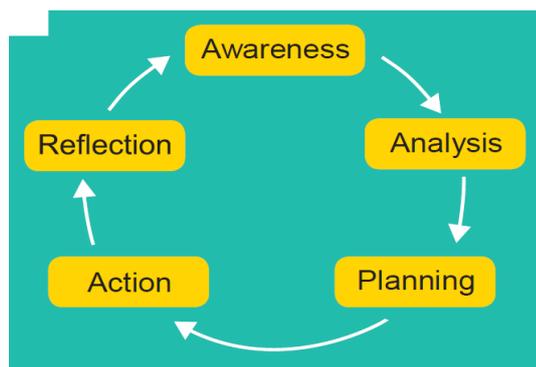
The ELASIS project was established to address the need for English language acquisition support for international students at UNSW. The need was identified as a major educational issue that affects not only international students but also local students as well. This is because we educate a large number of international students (over 15,000 from more than 120 countries) and promote a learning community where our students, local and international, study collaboratively in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, and at UNSW more widely. While international students entering UNSW have already achieved the English language proficiency requirement (generally IELTS 6.5 or above), this requirement does not necessarily provide an accurate benchmark of the students' mastery of English for academic purposes (Rochecoste, Oliver, Mulligan & Davies, 2010 cited in Kim, 2014). In addition, while it is agreed that international students need additional support for their on-going English language enhancement during their university studies, the one-size-fits-all approach does not work for advanced language users who all have different areas of language they need to improve. When international students are not able to use English efficiently as a tool for their learning, they tend to get frustrated. The frustration often leads to demotivation to study, procrastination or disengagement in class, which may be a source of difficulty experienced by those who have taught or worked with international students.

The ELASIS project aimed to find an innovative solution to provide pedagogically sustainable support for international students' English language enhancement so that they can take part in our diverse learning community as active learners, making their own unique contribution to building a better learning community at UNSW. Specifically, the project aimed to achieve the following outcomes:

1. To develop and run a co-curricular course to provide pedagogically sustainable support for international students' English language enhancement at scale (500 students in 2016) adopting the PA approach as the main framework;
2. To evaluate the course as an educational model that assists international students with English language enhancement and self-efficacy;
3. To offer a cost analysis of the co-curricular course.

## 5.2 Pedagogical approach

This project adopted the Personal Autonomous approach and developed the co-curricular course PELE. The PA approach was initially developed by the Project Leader being inspired by a social constructivist approach to translator education (Kiraly, 2000). It was devised to address the imbalance in translation students' language competence in their respective working languages (see Kim, 2014). This issue has been identified as a fundamental and critical issue in the field of translator education but there has been little experimental or classroom-based research undertaken on this issue to date. The PA approach is firmly grounded in the sociocultural theory of learning that learners construct their own knowledge through meaningful social interactions with people around them (c.f. Vygotsky 1978 cited in Kiraly, 2000).



Based on the PA approach, PELE promotes a cyclical exploratory research approach to learning. Teachers stimulate students to be aware of the need to improve their English language skills and then guide them to analyse their linguistic needs and develop a personal project to address a specific need of their own, implement the project and reflect on their progress. Students are provided with a supportive and resourceful learning environment in which they have full authority to control their own learning. The learning cycle is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: The cyclical PELE Model

The PELE course is also underpinned by a strong theoretical framework drawing from the fields of Language Education, Applied Linguistics, Sociocultural Theory, and Higher Education. The PELE model of language learning is innovative in its focus on promoting sustainable, autonomous learning, and in empowering students as partners (Healey, Flint & Harrington, 2014). In this way, it represents a significant departure from viewing international (and English as a second language) students from a deficit perspective (Benzie, 2010; Haugh, 2016). In PELE, international students are viewed as already being competent English users who need to develop their own independent learning methods in order to be self-motivated and effective as autonomous and continuous learners. Being aware of the affective components of learning and developing student independence, it recognises that language learning is intrinsically connected to emotions (Ross, 2016; Swain, 2013), students' identities (Murray, Gao & Lamb, 2011), self-confidence (Edwards & Roger, 2015), goals and motivations (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009) and students' access to, and ability to use, a range of language learning strategies (Zhang, 2015). All of these concepts combine to make PELE a unique model of English language enhancement, both in Australia and in higher education more globally.

## 5.3 Evaluation method

The pedagogical efficacy of PELE was evaluated using a mixed-methods research approach. Course entry and exit surveys were administered to students at the beginning (week 1 or 2) and end (week 13) of each semester, which collected both quantitative and qualitative data. Students were also asked to self-select to attend focus groups, held at the end of each semester to give students the opportunity to expand on their answers given in the exit surveys and tell their language learning stories. In addition, the personal language portfolios that students created as part of their course assessment requirement were also collected and analysed for evidence of language and skills enhancement. Finally, the course tutors were interviewed in order to gain insights from their perspectives about their students' language progress across each semester.

## 6. Project outcomes and deliverables

### 6.1 PELE evaluation

PELE was trialed and evaluated with a total of 562 students registering in 2016. Due to its nature as a co-curricular course, the withdrawal rate was quite high as students became busy with their credit-bearing courses each semester. In Semester 1, 2016, 355 students registered, 278 students were enrolled in the course, 180 students attended the first lecture, and 69 students completed the whole course. In Semester 2, 2016, we tried to address the low retention rate by asking students to indicate their availability and strong intention to attend the whole course before completing the entry survey, which we also made compulsory. This approach resulted in a slightly lower withdrawal rate in Semester 2: 207 students initially registered, 125 students completed the entry survey and therefore were enrolled, 80 students attended the first lecture, and 42 students completed the whole course. Therefore, despite our best efforts, it seemed that a certain withdrawal rate was to be expected due to the nature of a co-curricular course.

The course was evaluated, by participating students and tutors, as highly successful not only in enhancing students' English language skills, but also in developing their self-confidence, emotions about English, sense of belonging to UNSW, self-efficacy skills, autonomous learning skills, and motivation to study. Our analysis of the 2016 data shows the following seven major impacts of PELE on the participating students (Kim, Edwards & Hall, in preparation), which are supported by the data presented in Table 2 and Table 3 below:

- 1) **Improved English language skills:** 46% of students perceived that PELE had a strong impact on their English language skills, and the tutors noted differences in students' writing and speaking in particular (see data in Table 2 below).
- 2) **Increased positive emotions about English:** only 24% of students felt positive about their English when they started PELE, but 66% felt positive by the end, indicating a major shift in emotions about English over the course of a semester.
- 3) **Enhanced self-efficacy:** we tested 11 aspects of perceived self-efficacy, and students reported increases in all cases by the end of the PELE course. In addition, we found significant correlations between these 11 aspects of self-efficacy and students' emotions about their English (see data in Table 3 below).
- 4) **Stronger motivation to study:** 73% of students reported that PELE had a strong impact on their motivation to study in general, and students felt supported and encouraged by the learning community (see data in Table 2 below).
- 5) **Improved autonomous learning skills:** 61% of students reported that PELE had a strong impact on their autonomous learning skills (see data in Table 2 below), and qualitative data revealed that PELE stimulated students' agency
- 6) **Enhanced self-confidence:** 65% of students reported that PELE had a strong impact on developing their confidence in themselves (see data in Table 2 below). Confidence in using English was particularly

improved, which has a catalytic effect on students' willingness to communicate and participation in communication.

- 7) **Stronger sense of belonging to UNSW:** 75% of students reported feeling strongly or moderately connected to UNSW after taking PELE, compared to 58% at the start of the course. Students developing a stronger sense of belonging or connection has significant consequences for their overall experience of and satisfaction with the university.

Table 2: Perceived impact of PELE on the students

English language skills		Very Low Impact	Low Impact	Moderate Impact	High Impact	Very high impact	Total responses
	S1 Exit	3%	13%	51%	17%	16%	63
	S2 Exit	5%	8%	21%	47%	18%	38
	All total	4%	11%	40%	29%	17%	101
<b>Motivation to study</b>							
	S1 Exit	5%	10%	16%	51%	19%	63
	S2 Exit	0%	5%	18%	42%	34%	38
	All total	3%	8%	17%	48%	25%	101
<b>Autonomous learning skills</b>							
	S1 Exit	5%	11%	30%	35%	19%	63
	S2 Exit	0%	5%	24%	47%	24%	38
	All total	3%	9%	28%	40%	21%	101
<b>Confidence in yourself</b>							
	S1 Exit	3%	11%	24%	44%	17%	63
	S2 Exit	0%	11%	21%	34%	34%	38
	All total	2%	11%	23%	41%	24%	101

Some of the qualitative comments from students about the impact of the PELE course include:

- “It had a profound effect in [sic] my mental health, [I] felt part of the bigger society, gave me self-confident [sic], found new friends, felt rejuvenated after each lecture and tutorial.” (Student in the Exit Survey, S1 2016)
- “I have got a lot of experiences to improve my confidence [...] Then I feel more comfortable in English conversation and those became a virtuous circle for me – feel comfortable, engaged in more conversations and learn more.” (Student’s PELE portfolio, S1 2016)
- “PELE has given me the right amount of responsibility which is quite empowering. This newfound sense of responsibility makes me very conscious of all the other responsibilities in life that requires [sic] attention.” (PELE mentor reflection, S2 2016)

Overall, the findings from our evaluation of the pilot PELE course indicate that it had a multifaceted and strong impact on the students (mostly international students) who participated in the co-curricular mode in 2016. In addition to enhancing students’ English language skills, the data show that helping students to feel a sense of belonging to a community within PELE and at UNSW was very important, and that developing more positive emotions and perceptions of their abilities was related to greater self-efficacy and autonomous learning skills, which students need to apply to their UNSW studies.

Table 3: Correlations between emotions and self-efficacy from the combined S1 and S2 data

Aspects of self-efficacy	Descriptor	S1 & S2 combined data	
		Significance level	Correlation (Gamma)
Self-efficacy in enlisting language resources	A) Confidence locating UNSW resources	.000	.330
	B) Confidence locating digital resources for improving English	.000	.350
	C) Confidence asking someone to help check use of English	.000	.307
Self-efficacy for self-regulated learning	D) Confidence in identifying an area of English language needing improvement	.000	.295
	E) Confidence setting a realistic and achievable goal to improve an area of English	.000	.359
	F) Confidence in using appropriate strategies to help achieve a specific English language goal	.000	.431
	G) Confidence in evaluating and reflecting on success in achieving a specific English language goal	.000	.384
Social self-efficacy	H) Confidence in making friends at UNSW	.000	.336
	I) Confidence in participating confidently in classes at UNSW	.000	.371
	J) Confidence in working in group situation	.000	.394
Academic self-efficacy	K) Confidence in efficiently managing time to complete assignments	.000	.421

## 6.2 Course cost analysis

The total teaching cost of running the PELE course in both Semester 1 and Semester 2, 2016 are presented in Table 4 below. These costs were calculated to include the in-kind costs of Dr Mira Kim to prepare and give the PELE lectures and tutorials for 10 weeks in Semester 1 and 12 weeks in Semester 2 but they do not include the costs for developing teaching resources (e.g. diagnostic assessments). The other costs include paying tutors for 11 tutorials in Semester 1 and 5 tutorials in Semester 2, as well as marking and a special workshop which we ran in Semester 2.

Table 4: Costs of running PELE in S1 and S2, 2016

	S1	S2
Lectures	3,840.71	4,677.97
Tutorials	15,923.13	9,205.34
Marking	3,846.75	2,376.60
Workshop	-	1,871.26
<b>Total cost</b>	<b>\$25,943.31</b>	<b>\$20,293.33</b>

The actual cost per student was \$376 in S1 and \$483 in S2 when we used the number of students who completed the course successfully in each semester. These figures get significantly lower than the actual costs when we use the numbers of students who registered, enrolled and attended the first lecture, as shown in Table 5. If all the students who had registered to take PELE had continued and completed the course, the cost per student would have been \$78 in S1 and \$98 in S2.

Table 5: Cost analysis based on varying numbers of students in PELE in S1 and S2, 2016

S1 student numbers	Cost per student	S2 student numbers	Cost per student
355 registered	\$78	207 registered	\$98
278 enrolled	\$93	125 enrolled	\$162
180 attended first lecture	\$144	80 attended first lecture	\$254
69 completed the course	\$376	42 completed the course	\$483

### 6.3 PELE, New credit-bearing English language acquisition support course for students across faculties

As a result of the pedagogical success of the pilot co-curricular PELE course in 2016, PELE is now a fully designed English language acquisition support course including learning resources, tutor/mentor training methods and resources, and evaluation and reporting measures and mechanisms (survey, focus groups, portfolios). It is now offered as a face-to-face credit-bearing course (HUMS1005/ARTS5505) for undergraduate and postgraduate students across the university. In Semester 1 2017, 51 students are enrolled in the credit-bearing course. At the time of writing this report, the number of students enrolled in HUMS1005/ARTS5505 is 94.

In addition, a specific version of PELE will be offered in Semester 2 2017 for HDR candidates, using the existing lecture and tutorial format, but designed to address the needs of Higher Degree Research candidates. The total number of 132 HDR candidates expressed their interest in PELE during the submission period for two weeks. Through a screening process, 101 candidates have been enrolled in the course. This HDR version of PELE is being supported by the Pro-Vice Chancellor Office (Research Training), and the evaluation procedures developed in the 2016 pilot project (survey, focus groups, portfolio analysis) will be employed again with the HDR cohort.

PELE is run via a weekly lecture and tutorial, with many online resources included on Moodle. Students start the PELE course with awareness-raising through a needs analysis to identify a language goal (the 'awareness' and 'analysis' stages). Students then select or create their own intervention activity and methods (the 'planning' stage), and implement the intervention (the 'action' stage) over several weeks during the semester. Students then reflect and report on their own learning (the 'reflection' stage). At the end of the semester, they share their learning highlights in Learning Festival, which is similar to an academic conference. The stages of the PELE model include various assessment tasks that culminate in a personal project portfolio, in which students record the progress and success of their intervention on their own language enhancement. Once students have completed one semester of PELE, they may become a 'mentor' for future PELE students. Mentors take an active role in the tutorials, supporting students in planning and developing their personal projects.

## 7. Evaluation of Outcomes

### 7.1 Challenges

The main challenge we encountered when running the pilot version of PELE as a co-curricular course in 2016 was the high withdrawal rate. While a high number of students registered their interest in the course (562 students in total), only around 50% of those initially registered attended the first lecture, and then only around 50% of those attending the first lecture completed the whole course (i.e. attending 80% or more classes and/or completing all the assignments). Students tended to withdraw mid-way through the semester as they became pre-occupied with their credit-bearing course assignments. Therefore, we can conclude that there was and is significant interest from students across UNSW in taking PELE, but that due to many students' high workloads, a co-curricular version of PELE is likely to experience a high withdrawal rate.

## **7.2 Lessons learnt with students as working partners**

Data collected in Semester 1, 2016, informed a few changes to PELE in Semester 2, 2016. Firstly, focus group data informed us that students enjoyed the lectures and tutorials, but also wanted informal spaces to interact in English outside of the formal study environment. They suggested forming 'social clubs' with other PELE students for Semester 2, and some students volunteered to lead the clubs. In Semester 2, a number of the PELE students participated in one or more of six clubs created (focusing on singing, conversation practice, tennis, board games and videos). We learnt that many international students at UNSW may be lacking informal spaces to use their English for everyday purposes, and also that social clubs can create a strong sense of community amongst students. One of our team members (Bosheng Jing) intends to pursue this area of research (community, belonging and identity) further with his own PhD study.

Secondly, survey and focus group data from Semester 1 informed us that students needed more detailed assistance in setting their language goals before creating their personal projects. Some students requested a kind of 'diagnosis' of their needs. Therefore, we designed diagnostic assessments covering reading, writing, speaking and listening skills, and offered students the option of taking the diagnostic assessments at the start of Semester 2. We found that the majority of students were very keen to take the assessments, and many of them used the detailed diagnostic feedback as the basis for their personal projects. The diagnostic assessments are continuously being used and enhanced, and one of our team members (Jason Heffernan) intends to pursue this line of inquiry further with his own PhD research.

Lastly but most importantly, we have confirmed that this language proficiency challenge is a complex educational issue, which cannot be efficiently addressed with a simple solution. We believe that PELE has been highly successful because we give authority to students to control and be responsible for their own learning and we create a learning community in which they feel welcome, secured and comfortable. Once they have accepted themselves as they are, they get motivated to do the work. Once they have achieved something, small or big, and can present evidence of the achievement to others and themselves, they start to feel confident and get more motivated to do more. Many students have discussed this virtuous cycle of learning in various ways and presented different kinds of evidence for this virtuous cycle of learning in their personal project portfolios.

## **7.3 Recommendations**

As a result of piloting and evaluating the pedagogical efficacy of the PELE course, we recommend that PELE should be strongly supported at the Faculty level but also university-wide. As mentioned above, PELE is already being offered as a credit-bearing course in 2017. We have been able to continue collecting data in 2017 using the same evaluation mechanisms. While our 2017 data is yet to be fully analysed, our initial reflections on the credit-bearing mode suggest that students are more engaged with the course and much less likely to withdraw than in the co-curricular mode. There is the potential, therefore, for the students to benefit even more from PELE than the students in the pilot course did in 2016. We recommend that UNSW Faculties consider how PELE can be incorporated as an optional credit-bearing course within their programs, especially in their postgraduate programs, which are often quite restricted. Finally, we also recommend the development of blended learning materials for PELE (videos and more online resources) so that it may be offered in the blended delivery mode in the future, would make PELE become more cost-effective and more accessible to a larger number of students at UNSW. We intend to apply for further funding to support this development.

## **8. Financial statement acquittal of funds**

The total project budget from the grant was \$171,000. The largest expenditure was for personnel: a Research Officer and two Research Assistants to assist with the day-to-day operation of the project, collection and analysis of data and reporting of the findings; and tutors to teach the PELE course in Semester 1 and Semester 2, 2016. A small amount of remaining funds were carried over into 2017, and those funds were then fully expended to employ casual Research Assistant staff to continue with data collection, analysis and reporting. The overspend has been moved to the project leader's new project that explores the pedagogical efficacy of PELE as a credit-bearing course.