Double narrative of a researcher and the researched: the journey of English-language learning

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Double narrative of a researcher and the researched: the journey of English-language learning

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ABSTRACT
As I embarked on my PhD study in Australia, I felt excited because my study was born out of reflection on my own journey of English-language learning. I decided to use my experiences as a touchstone for an understanding of the experiences of others like me. The study presented here is part of a larger study and is a double narrative that explores the researcher’s and the four participants’ experiences of learning English language in their home country contexts and also in Australia while they are studying in an Australian tertiary context. Through a reflective practice, I have reflectively studied my and the participants’ experiences with language learning strategies (LLS) to improve English-language skills and to better socialise into Australian academic and social discourses as international students. By linking the researcher and the researched closely, this research makes a contribution to English learning and teaching on the development of English-language skills of international students through the use of LLS. It provides some implications to institutions and advice to students like me.

Introduction
I came to Australia to do my Master’s degree in education and found my experience as an international student challenging, and rewarding. In Mongolia, I mainly learnt English grammar and translated sentences from and into English. I was a successful student. In fact, I was so successful that my university hired me as an English-language teacher soon after my graduation. Further, my professional ambition led me to wanting to study overseas and I decided to prepare for and sit the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) test. I passed it with 7.5. The IELTS 7.5 which made me believe that ‘I am ready to study in Australia’ was totally misleading. I soon found out that my English-language proficiency was not good enough to study at an Australian university level. I wanted to figure out how best to move forwards in my new environment. Reflecting upon my own journey and knowledge built through my lived experiences in Australia was instrumental in the formulation of my doctoral research.
Background

International students represent a key stakeholder group for the Australian higher education sector (Arkoudis, Baik, Bexley, & Doughney, 2014). English-language proficiency (ELP) plays a vital role for these students in completing their studies in Australian universities, especially for those students who have English as an Additional Language (EAL) (Arkoudis et al., 2014). The four participants of my study were designated pseudonyms Ai, Akio (Japan), Dara (Cambodia), and Sung Hi (South Korea). Ai, Akio and Sung Hi were studying undergraduate degree courses and Dara was studying for his doctoral degree. The length of time they had lived in Australia by the time they participated in this study varied, with an average of six months.

Research indicates that low level of ELP of many Asian EAL students is one of the fundamental issues that negatively impacts in completing the disciplinary requirements of Australian universities (Robertson, Line, Jones, & Thomas, 2000; Sawir, Marginson, Forbes-Mewett, Nyland, & Ramia, 2012). Phakiti, Hirsh, and Woodrow (2013) add that ELP together with motivation, self-regulation and self-efficacy are significant factors that impact on international students’ English-language learning and academic achievement. Students want to mix with members of the Australian community in order to improve their social and academic English (Dooey, Oliver, & Rochecouste, 2012). In order to maximise students’ learning outcomes, Phakiti et al. (2013) suggest that university support is essential. My study views LLS as one vehicle to promote success in learning the English language.

The application of LLS is considered ‘an extremely powerful learning tool’ (O’Malley, Chamot, Stewner-Manzanares, Kupper, & Russo, 1985, p. 43) for learners in their attempt to communicate and learn in target languages. Griffiths (2008, p. 87) defines LLS as ‘activities consciously chosen by learners for the purpose of regulating their own language learning’. Rubin, Chamot, Harris, and Anderson (2007, p. 153) point out ‘there is no ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ strategy but rather one that works for the particular learner for the particular task and goal’. Chamot (2004) suggests that modified classification systems can exist for researchers since learners’ learning goals can be expected to vary in response to factors such as the need for interpersonal communication skills and academic study in a second language (L2) at various institutional levels. As such, the types of LLS used in this study were context-specific strategies to assist the participants across their academic and social discourse needs. The LLS that were selected for this study were oral communication strategies such as presenting yourself as an approachable person by smiling and asking people’s names first, initiating conversation by asking questions, speaking two sentences in each event, changing topic, taking a risk to keep the conversation going and filling awkward moments in the conversation by using Jump Starters. Reading strategies such as skim reading to get general idea, scan reading to get specific information, using a mind-map to see how a reading relates to other readings, asking questions about the reading contents, critically reflecting on reading and reading deeply were included. Other strategies included were tutorial participation strategies such as arriving to a tutorial 10 minutes early and talking to my classmates to get to know them better, commenting on an aspect of the reading, disagreeing with a fellow student’s point of view and responding to tutor’s question. Also metacognitive tutorial strategies such as planning for a tutorial by reading the assigned texts, monitoring the flow of discussion, monitoring comprehension, monitoring one’s involvement in the discussion and evaluating the outcome and acting on it if needed were selected.

In order to increase awareness of the importance of using LLS, learners are taught and encouraged to practise LLS systematically and consciously, and to reinforce and monitor
their strategy use while working on language tasks in order to successfully learn the English language (Cohen, 2011). Cohen (2003) suggests that the form of the strategy training should depend upon the students’ needs and the availability of resources including time, money, materials and teacher trainers. I developed six instructional modules in the abovementioned strategy areas. I conducted an intensive five-day strategy training program and participants selectively attended the sessions according to their needs. Scaffolding as a teaching approach was used to facilitate the LLS. Bransford, Brown, and Cocking (2000) explain that during the scaffolding process, an expert models an activity, provides learners with advice and examples, guides and prompts students in practice gradually removing support until finally no support at all is needed. I used these steps to facilitate participants through different stages of learning to use strategies. Observation was used during the strategy training and a strategy checklist was given to all participants to use for a period of eight weeks in order to track and evaluate the progress of their strategy use. I monitored the participants’ strategy use during the strategy checklist period. The use of a strategy checklist is a well-recommended method to evaluate the effectiveness of strategy training (Cohen, Weaver, & Li, 1998; Rubin et al., 2007).

**Narrative inquiry as methodology**

Narrative inquiry is a methodology that aims to understand and inquire into experience through ‘collaboration between researcher and participants, over time, in a place or series of places, and in social interaction with milieus’ (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 20). Narrative inquiry is a way of understanding stories of experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). This is done through the three-dimensionality of narrative space: temporality (temporarily directs attention towards the past, present and future); sociality (social conditions under which people’s experiences are unfolding) and place (physical place where the inquiry takes place) (Clandinin & Huber, 2010). This article presents stories of how the researcher and participants learnt English language in their home country contexts and the role of LLS use on their ability to socialise into Australian academic and social discourses.

**Community of practice as a theoretical perspective**

Community of practice was considered a suitable theoretical perspective for this study. It was first used by Lave and Wenger (1991) to discuss the notion of legitimate peripheral participation. The term peripherality means ‘an opening, a way of gaining access to sources for understanding through growing involvement’ (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 37). During such process ‘novice’ and ‘expert’ relationship is key. Researchers explain the stages of the socialisation process that a novice goes through in order to participate in social interactions. At the beginning stage, novices position themselves as peripheral observers (Ohta, 1999), thus their involvement in the social practices with ‘experts’ is limited (Lave & Wenger, 1991). As exposure to social interactions increases with the help of experts, novices slowly start internalising ways of appropriate participation, including communicative norms and nuances, and meanings and purposes implicit within them (Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976). Gradually, novices develop the ability to participate in the interactional routines without the help of the expert; they deepen their understanding of implicit meanings of social interactional routines (Wertsch, 1985) and become legitimate peripheral participants (Lave & Wenger, 1991). In this study, I was interested to find out whether the use of LLS can positively impact
on participants’ ability to increase their involvement in the interactions with the experts, and in turn enable them to increase their English-language performance.

**Reflective practice as a mode of inquiry**

Another important premise that figures prominently in narrative inquiry and is meaningful to my study is the use of reflective practice as a mode of inquiry. ‘An important part of ‘reflectivity’ is the notion of ‘reflexivity’. This involves reflecting on the self, the researcher, the person who did it, the me or the I’ (Wellington, 2000, pp. 42–43). First, I reflected on my own experiences with learning English and with LLS. This process was informed by Wallace’s (1991) model of reflective practice that focuses on teachers becoming reflective practitioners in order to find better ways of meeting their students’ needs. Wallace’s model consists of two types of knowledge: experiential knowledge and received knowledge. Experiential knowledge is the knowledge that arises out of our own practices, described by Schön (1983) as ‘knowing-in-action’. But received knowledge is knowledge that we gain through education and professional development and consists of ‘facts, data and theories’ (Wallace, 1991, p. 12). Wallace’s ideas encapsulate my own experience with LLS during my socialisation processes into L2 academic and social discourses in terms of my experiential and received knowledge. I also invited the participants to tell me their stories through reflecting on their experiences with English-language and LLS use.

**Data collection and analysis**

Narrative is considered both the phenomenon and the method (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Central to narrative inquiry is to understand the meanings of people’s lives, and their stories are treated as data (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). I collected a large amount of data from participants’ responses to more or less structured one-to-one interviews (Polkinghorne, 2005) before and after the strategy training program, from observation notes during the strategy training program about the participants’ engagement with various LLS, and from strategy checklist that they did following the strategy training for eight weeks.

There is no one unifying method of analysing stories (Riessman, 1993). However, ‘narratives do not speak for themselves’ (Personal Narratives Group, 1989, p. 264). According to Frank (2000, p. 4), ‘the researcher’s role is to interpret the stories in order to analyse the underlying narrative that the storytellers may not be able to give voice to themselves’. Given the quantity of data, I had to choose narratives in the inquiry that I believed best illuminated the ‘truth’ of the experiences. Craig (2009, p. 112) points out that because people’s experiences are ‘constantly in flux, reflection is never static’, the narratives’ trustworthiness comes from their resonance (Conle, 1996). In this study, I chose stories that highlighted critical events, and revealed students’ ways of learning and events that positively impacted on their ability to make a difference in their learning and living experiences in Australia. I looked for stories that illuminated and reflected our temporarily connected lives as they developed and changed over the course of the study.

**Reflecting on my experiential and received knowledge of LLS**

When I came to Australia, I recognised that life in the Australian education context was going to be full of challenges and frustrations. I had to be proactive in my pursuit of learning
English, not only for academic purposes, but also to be part of the L2 community. I discovered two critical elements that collectively marked the way forwards. The first of these was the realisation of the need to come out of my comfort zone. The second was my discovery of LLS to support my learning of the English language.

I immersed myself in the social aspects of the English language by ‘putting myself out there’ into the community. Although coming out of my comfort zone was at times uncomfortable or challenging, overall I was enjoying learning by being involved in various activities with native English speakers and it was rewarding to see improvements in my English skills. The more success I sampled, the more confident I became in my ability to use the English language. Panicucci (2007) developed a comfort zone model based on the belief that by overcoming a feeling of hesitancy or self-doubt often associated with challenges and at the same time experiencing success, people grow as individuals. Panicucci further articulates ‘intellectual development and personal growth do not occur if there is no disequilibrium in a person’s current thinking or feeling’ (2007, p. 39). Through challenging and supported environments, learners gradually become skilled at participating in discussion and other activities (Wertsch, 1991).

As I continued using English language in its social contexts, conscious LLS use helped by providing me with the means to traverse the practices associated with L2 social and academic discourses. My experience made me believe that the interactions with which I engaged in social settings outside university impacted greatly on my ability to participate in classroom discussions. For example, I started feeling comfortable participating in tutorial activities because I was voicing my opinion and arguing points effectively; I noticed my classmates acknowledging my ideas as what I was saying made sense to them, and overall I felt confident and happy in my learning experience. Based on my experience, I came to realise the importance of learning through English, not about English.

My understanding of the concept of LLS, and experiences with it, were further advanced through my formal learning and professional practices. Dealing with LLS on formal learning and professional levels meant that I looked deeply into many different needs that students had because strategy use is dynamic and changing as it varies across contexts. For example, Gao (2006) identified that in China the students used LLS such as memorising and reviewing mainly to pass official exams and tests. In England, they were motivated to improve their English through active socialisation with English speakers by making friends with locals, living with local students and guessing or acquiring meanings of new words in real-life interactions. My experiences with LLS, together with a process of reflection on my strategy use, not only helped me develop a greater understanding of LLS, but also helped me realise that LLS is a powerful tool for successful language learning. I am wondering can LLS be as powerful for the participants in my study as they have been for me?

Reflecting on English language learning in home country contexts

Prior to arrival in Australia, all participants had learnt English, on average, for 10 years, mainly through grammar-oriented teaching with little focus on interactive communicative learning. Dara had been learning English for about 14 years. Constrained by his employment, he was only able to learn English on and off in private language schools. As a result of this, Dara’s English was, as he put it, ‘I speak little bit speaking, grammar’ Sung Hi had been studying English for 10 years, an experience she described as ‘… grammar in school, grammar in
university … memorise every sentence. We just focus on reading and grammar to get high mark in test.’ Before Dara and Sung Hi enrolled in their courses, they successfully completed an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) course of an Australia university.

Ai and Akio gave a similar description about their English-language learning experience. However, at university, Ai had an opportunity to speak English with her native English teachers ‘just for fun … like playing games. I think that is useful.’ Akio who had a native English teacher in his first year at university also had a positive recollection ‘conversation was very effective.’ The fun way of learning English and conversational English were motivating and provided some support for Ai and Akio with respect to developing communicative proficiency. Both Ai and Akio had been learning English for nine years and had to pass a Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) to be able to study in an Australian university.

It appears that participants’ English-language education portrays an exam-oriented system that focused on reproductive rote learning. In other words, participants’ English-language learning did not occur in a meaningful social and cultural context in their home country contexts.

Reflecting on Australian university learning

When Dara first embarked on his PhD journey, he found it ‘very challenging … because everything single have to do independently.’ I was interested in how much English he spoke with native English speakers, to which Dara replied ‘I have very little time to interact with other children [students] … just my supervisor and library people.’ Sung Hi, on the other hand, was satisfied with the Australian university’s education system. However, it appeared that Sung Hi’s English-language proficiency was a barrier that prevented her from effective learning and interaction in university activities. She said ‘… a lot of problem is related to language problem.’ Dara and Sung Hi wanted to learn some effective oral communication skills that would help them improve these skills.

Ai and Akio revealed some difficulties they were facing in tutorial participation and reading. Ai said ‘Tutorial is very hard for me. All of them are native speaker … they talk so fast and sometimes I couldn’t catch it. I can’t speak well because of my English.’ Akio also said ‘It is difficult express my opinion. I can’t say that in English.’ For Ai and Akio, their struggle to participate in tutorial discussions was primarily due to their limited English language. Ai and Akio also expressed their concern about having difficulties in understanding their unit readers. Ai and Akio revealed that they wanted to learn some LLS to better participate in tutorials and read effectively.

Participants’ stories suggest that the intensive preparations for EAP and TOEFL did not provide them with opportunities to develop the proficiency in the English language and awareness of academic conventions to operate effectively at an Australian university. Like me, they passed the entry requirements, and yet they could not ‘enter’.

Reflecting on speaking English outside university

Dara again expressed his concern about his limited encounters with other people both on and off campus with whom he could have a conversation in English. According to Dara, the only other time he had conversations on campus, apart from with his supervisor was with his ‘… one friend from Bangladesh and another from my country. My English since I came
here not much improve.’ Like Dara, Sung Hi also did not have many opportunities to speak English. ‘I don’t have much opportunity to speak because I usually deal with mathematics. If I have free time I just meet Korean friends.’ Sung Hi felt little ‘… improvement with my English.’ Both Dara and Sung Hi wanted to make Australian friends.

On the other hand, Ai and Akio speak English with Australian people on a regular basis. They believe that their spoken English has improved since their arrival in Australia. Ai said ‘I have much opportunity to speak English. My English improved a little.’ Akio made some Australian-born friends who were interested in learning Japanese and they teach each other their languages. He said ‘I always try to talk with someone. My English is improving.’ This reveals that Ai and Akio are utilising their opportunity to immerse themselves in Australian language and culture. Importantly, they have friends who can support them when help is needed.

Dara and Sung Hi’s experiences outside university indicate that limited English-language skills and differences in culture contributed to their challenges in becoming involved in the Australian community more broadly. Based on their stories, participants were positioned as peripheral observers (Ohta, 1999) in their L2 context. However, Ai and Akio who had greater opportunities to speak with native English speakers or experts, appeared to have increased social interactions which suggests that they have a greater potential of becoming legitimate peripheral participants (Lave and Wenger, 1991).

Reflecting on the experiences with strategy training program

The impact of oral communication strategies on the L2 socialisation

About his overall impression of the oral communication strategies, Dara said ‘Strategies you gave me to want to talk with my family and some people we rarely talk.’ Dara’s use of English beyond university was mainly for simple transactions in places like shopping centres and streets. He felt, however, buoyed by his supervisor’s comments ‘My supervisor say you now speak better English. She said before I didn’t talk too much with you, now I want to say thing to you and to talk to you.’ Dara came to believe that with the help of the strategies, an improvement in his English-language proficiency had occurred. However, due to his limited social encounters with experts, Dara remained as peripheral observer.

Sung Hi, on the other hand, reported her experiences with oral communication strategies as a success. With the help of the strategies, Sung Hi realised the importance of initiating the greetings and how much difference a simple greeting could make to a conversation. Sung Hi even noticed a willingness from her conversation partners to talk to her because she presented herself as an approachable person and tried to maintain conversations through use of the strategies. Sung said ‘Whenever I tried to use it [strategy], I think they have or they feel something different from me because I tried to talk more.’ Further, with the help of the strategies, Sung Hi challenged herself to come out of her comfort zone and talk to people and ask questions without worrying about making mistakes. Sung Hi also believed that her oral English improved since she started using the strategies. Unlike Dara, Sung Hi’s account of her use of the oral communication strategies reveals that they motivated her and helped her to begin to apprentice herself into the L2 culture. This significantly increased her chances of moving away from being a peripheral observer to a legitimate peripheral participant.
The impact of tutorial participation and reading strategies on learning

Ai pointed out how important it was to establish a comfortable relationship between her and her Australian classmates by having an informal chat before and after tutorials. She said, ‘I tried to talk to them before tutorial and after tutorial to make friends. And the atmosphere was changing and it became easier to talk to them in the tutorial.’ However, she admitted that she was still struggling to participate in discussions. This was due to her lack of preparation for the tutorial and also she did not use metacognitive tutorial strategies. Rushing to finish reading using only surface reading strategies attributed to her lack of preparation for tutorials and hence the struggle to participate in tutorials followed. ‘I need to finish reading faster … skimming and scanning was very useful. I always wish I could have used deep reading strategy but unit reader was really huge ... many point in everywhere so confused.’ Whilst she did not use deep reading strategies, Ai was at least able to develop a repertoire of cognitive strategies that assisted her in getting to know her classmates better and to read long texts.

Like Ai, Akio was able to achieve a comfortable relationship with his classmates. He said, ‘… before the tutorial if I talk to them I can understand what they are like so I realise that they are very nice. So I can say anything. And then if the topic is what I know I can participate.’ Moreover, Akio believed that his English improved after the strategy training. He pointed out ‘when I speak English my feeling is more relaxed and I thought my English has improved.’ However, like Ai, Akio only used surface reading strategies alone without engaging with the deep reading strategies. As a result, he was not able to actively participate in the tutorials, as he wanted to. Akio realised the significance of deep engagement with his readings in order to better understand the texts and actively participate in tutorials.

Participants’ positive comments show that the strategies often served as answers or at least partial solutions to challenging situations. This suggests that learners’ strategic competence can be developed through raising awareness, conscious use of strategies and supervision of strategy use. Participants also suggested that strategy use led to better language performance and that this, in turn, improved their English-language proficiency.

However, Dara’s story, that illustrates unsuccessful strategy use, indicates that strategy training will only be able to support the language performance if learners consciously and effectively use the strategies. Dara’s story also tells me that physical location in the L2 context, with mere exposure to its social practices and native English speakers, do not of themselves provide an appropriate and adequate socialisation context and improve one’s English-language skills.

Implications for institutions

Engaging in experiences of the researcher and the researched, from the perspective of narrative inquiry, closely impacts on me as a researcher and a professional in the field of English-language teaching and learning. Based on the experiences of the participants and myself with the use of LLS, I propose that these strategies can be extremely powerful tools to develop English-language performance if they are used consciously and effectively. Also, this study found that the English-language gate-keeping mechanisms are not particularly reliable tools to measure proficiency. This finding is in line with Griffiths’ (2003) findings that TOEFL or IELTS do not of themselves provide a comprehensive preparation for coping with language issues in, for example, Australian universities. Arkoudis et al. (2014) point out that
international EAL students expect outcomes from their investment in an Australian education. Based on these findings, I have some implications to suggest to Australian tertiary institutions.

One of the principles included in the *Good Practice Principles for English Language Proficiency for International Students* report (Australian Universities Quality Agency, 2009, p. 10) released by the Australian Federal Government to guide university practices states, ‘International students are encouraged and supported to enhance their English language development through effective social interaction on and off campus.’ Many Australian universities make the development of international students’ ELP one of the key priorities in their learning and teaching (Arkoudis et al., 2014). I suggest that LLS training should be used as an initiative for developing international students’ ELP at university. As can be seen from the participants’ stories, they had a desire to engage with more members of the Australian community both on and off campus and improve their ELP, but did not know how to do that. This study shows that through the use of LLS this can be achieved. This study identifies the importance of developing strategy training programs based on learners’ specific needs rather than just ‘lumping’ them into a generic program. Giving students a say through interview and needs analysis is demonstrated in this study as an essential element to ensure that participants’ specific needs are targeted and addressed. Equally important as the development of strategy training specific to students’ needs, is the use of a strategy checklist after the completion of the strategy training program. It elongates the intervention of the training program, making it more capable of bringing about long-term change in language use. These practical contributions to English-language learning and teaching, particularly with respect to the use of strategy training programs, deserve to be considered in the developing EAL international students’ ELP.

I also recommend that tertiary institutions in Australia review entrance requirements such as IELTS and TOEFL in order to identify the extent to which they are valid indicators of competence to enable EAL international students to effectively engage with all aspects of Australian curriculum. If, after review, IELTS and instruments like IELTS are retained, it is recommended that required entrance scores be reviewed. Data from this study indicate that current scores are not a good indicator of students’ English-language ability to cope with Australian university learning. Determinations need to be made as to what scores are really required to enable students to operate effectively in the Australian tertiary environment. It is useful to cite Ingram’s (2005) comments with respect to the issues associated with IELTS. Ingram, a co-developer of IELTS, suggests that issues associated with the testing system should be solved by universities who are accepting students, and that this should be done by establishing ‘realistic and appropriate proficiency levels for entry purposes’ (2005, para. 2). As to what this might comprise, Ingram makes no further comment.

**Advice for current and future students like me**

I want to remind Asian students like me to remember that the social aspect of learning a language deserves to be considered, and engaged with, even if it is beyond the formal expectations of learning. Language learning is not only about developing linguistic competence, but also, more importantly, understanding and using ‘language as social practice’ (Scarino & Liddicoat, 2009, p. 16). I urge students like me to get as much exposure to Australian social practices as possible and seek out opportunities to interact with native
English speakers. I recommend students use simple oral communication strategies to get them started. However, it is important to understand that, as is demonstrated through this study, the use of oral communication strategies will only be successful when learners use them consciously and effectively and are willing to step out of their ‘comfort zone’ to listen to, and to talk with, native English speakers. The initial use of oral communication strategies will support the development of more complex strategies and this will help students to compensate in dealing with their language problems (Bialystok, 1981).

It must be remembered, however, that the level of English that students need in order to participate in academic practices is much more demanding and complex. Also, students need to understand that a certain level of academic uncertainty is natural. Macaro (2006, p. 264) points out that ‘One thing seems to be increasingly clear and that is that, across learning context, those learners who are pro-active in their pursuit of language learning appear to learn best’. Students should be aware of this and I urge them to use LLS, as they have the potential to clarify uncertainties and successfully support learning in the L2 context.

Throughout my PhD dissertation and this article, I have shared the particularities of my lived experiences as a Mongolian student learning and living in Australia. My engagement with the English language, and the obstacles I have had to surmount as part of my experience, have brought me to this point and enabled me to reflect on my journey. I hope that my experience of traversing the L2 socialisation process, both academic and social, and of helping others do the same, will be of benefit to students like me.

Notes on contributor

Nara Tsedendamba completed her PhD studies in 2014 in the School of Education, Murdoch University. Her research focus includes use of language-learning strategies and its impact on second-language academic and social discourse socialisation, international students’ experiences and academic literacy development. Currently, she is working at Charles Sturt University as an academic literacy adviser with a special area in English language.

References


