

## Building Relationships with Community Members: Lessons Learnt from Fieldwork in Penang, Malaysia

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Article Info	ABSTRACT
<p><b>Article History</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Article Received March 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2022</li><li>• Article Accepted March 28<sup>th</sup>, 2022</li></ul> <p><b>Keywords</b></p> <p>Building Relationships Insider/Outsider Small Talks Flexibility Code-switching Giving Back</p>	<p>As the world is rapidly chasing processes of modernisation and globalisation, many ethnic communities are perceiving global languages, such as English and Mandarin, as the language-in-demand for academic and economic purposes. This situation leads to young people shifting away from heritage languages, and as a result, heritage languages are disappearing at an alarming rate. Similar situation is taking place in Malaysia, which leads me to conduct a study examining the efforts to maintain Chinese heritage languages in Penang. Data are collected via interviews conducted with 46 participants representing three categories of macro, meso, and micro levels within the Chinese community in Penang. In this article, my goal is to share some lessons learnt from the fieldwork. Specifically, I focus on unpacking three approaches to building relationships with members of the Chinese community. They are holding small talks, being flexible to code-switching, and giving back to the community. Resulting from such relationships is that the Chinese community in Penang become more aware of heritage language maintenance.</p>

## I. INTRODUCTION

In the present digital era, the use of heritage languages is diminishing as many ethnic communities around the world, influenced by processes of globalisation, modernisation, and transmobility, perceive English and Mandarin as the international languages-in-demand for academic and economic opportunities. This situation resulted in the expense of shifting away from heritage languages and turned the need of maintaining heritage languages into a key concern because heritage languages are disappearing at an alarming rate [12]. To shed light on the definition of heritage languages, they are those languages spoken by the respective ethnic community to emphasise the existing of their legitimacy.

In Penang, a state located in northern Peninsular Malaysia, the Chinese community there speaks a variety of Chinese heritage languages including Hokkien, Hakka, Cantonese, Hainan, Teochew, and Taishan, which reflects family history, roots, local identity, and culture [14]. These languages are spoken in most domains and act as the everyday language of social communication. Nevertheless, they are currently facing a host of challenges in terms of language maintenance. Past studies [15], [17], [22] have demonstrated competitive usage between Chinese heritage languages and Mandarin in Penang to a large extent that many from the Chinese community there have chosen to speak Mandarin due to it having more economic and pragmatic values. Additionally, some perceived Mandarin as the common language representing their ethnic community [16], leading to the reduced use of Chinese heritage languages in many domains including home, religious, and social [17]. Recent studies [10], [15], [16] have shown that many parents from the Chinese community in Penang are now speaking Mandarin and/or English to their children while abandoning the use of Chinese heritage languages. This situation resulted in some of the heritage languages being endangered [13], which triggered the question of their future survival. Thus, I delved into the investigation of the language issue faced.

In this article, my goal is to share some lessons learnt from the fieldwork I conducted in relation to the investigation. In the next section, I present a brief overview of the history and language policy of Penang. Following that, I discuss the methodology used for the investigation. Subsequently, I share my reflections as an insider and outsider researcher and

the lessons learnt during fieldwork. Lastly, I end the article with a concluding statement.

### Penang as Research Site

Penang consists of two parts, Penang Island and Seberang Perai. With a population of 1.77 million [4], there are three main ethnic communities – *Bumiputras* (a term used to refer to the Malays and Indigenous people) (47.2%), Chinese (42.3%), and Indians (10.2%). Other small ethnic communities made up the remaining 0.3% of the total population. With such diverse ethnic communities living together from the past to the present, a variety of languages were spoken from generations to generations. Likewise, many different cultures and traditions are practised. Hence, Ooi defines Penang's identity as a "rich and colourful admixture of socio-cultural traits and traditions" [18].

Modern Penang was founded in 1786 by Sir Francis Light. Following the foundation, George Town was declared as a free trading port, which connected merchants from Europe, India, China, and South East Asia the opportunity to expand their commercial activities. As the trading industry flourished in Penang, Chinese merchants set up shops in George Town. The development of tin mining industry in Taiping, Perak, also attracted Chinese migrants to work as labourers. When the industry ended, these labourers moved to bigger cities, like Penang, for better work opportunities. After years of hardship, these merchants and labourers married and settled in Penang, with their children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren who continue to live there until today.

Penang's population was also boosted by the influx of merchants and labourers from India. As early as 1770, merchants from Bombay arrived in Penang for commercial activities, followed by Indian labourers to work at the rubber and tea plantations. Similar to the Chinese, these merchants and labourers settled in Penang with some bringing their wives from India while others married local women. In addition, the colonial days attracted many migrants such as Thais, Achenese, Arabs, Armenians, Jews, Japanese, Burmese, and Europeans. All in all, this diversity of ethnic communities shaped the present-day Penang's multiethnic population.

Multilingualism is observed throughout Penang's multiethnic population. As enacted in the Federal Constitution of Malaysia, Malay holds the highest linguistic capacity in Malaysia due to its status as the country's sole national and official language. This

enaction applies to all states in Malaysia including Penang. Therefore, Malay is the language of government administration and legislation. It is also used as the main medium of instruction in “national” schools where most subjects from primary to secondary levels are taught using Malay.

In spite of Malay holding the symbol of unity in Malaysia and Penang, the vitality of the former colonial language, English, is not forgotten. English was the official language of government administration prior to Malaysia’s independence. After independence, the official language status of English was removed to give way to Malay. Nevertheless, English retains its importance as the unofficial language of Malaysia and of Penang. It is taught in school as a subject while at tertiary level, science courses at government universities and all courses at private universities/colleges are taught in English. It also acts as the language of communication for international trading, local businesses, and tourism [16].

The National Language Acts 1963/1967 promotes multilingualism through its statement of allowing any languages to be used, taught, and learnt in Malaysia. For the Chinese community, they brought along Chinese heritage languages (listed in Introduction) when they first arrived in Malaysia. Today, their family members continue to speak those heritage languages, mainly in the home and social domains. In the educational domain, standard Mandarin Chinese (henceforth Mandarin) was introduced in the 1920s as the medium of instruction in Chinese-medium primary schools, also known as “national-type” schools [21]. In the last decade, Mandarin has become a popular language of communication among the younger generation Chinese [23], thus causing Chinese heritage languages to lose their heritage and cultural status and rising questions regarding their survival [14].

As for the Indian community, they spoke Hindi, Telugu, Punjabi, and Malayalam as heritage languages within the home and social domains. Additionally, when the Tamils arrived in Penang in the 19th century, they introduced Tamil to the Indian community, which subsequently became the medium of instruction in Tamil-medium primary schools. However, with the increasing value of English in the present globalised world, many have shifted to speak English, which resulted in the diminishing use of Indian heritage languages [20]. In addition to the mentioned languages, the other small ethnic communities speak their heritage languages, such as

Vietnamese, French, German, Nepali, Tagalog, Bahasa Indonesian, Korean, and Japanese. Manglish (a popular colloquial variety of Malaysian English) and Bahasa Rojak (translated as “salad language” to refer to a mixture of two or more languages in a conversation) are also popularly heard in social conversations as they denote the identity of being Malaysianness.

In concluding the language situation of Penang, the multilingualism exhibited there is made up of layers of language diversity, which reveals a rich yet complex linguistic ecology that resulted from its past history. Such richness and complexity form the present-day multilingual identity of Penang where global languages, including the sole national and official language, are used mostly for official and educational purposes while heritage languages are mainly spoken in the social and home domains.

## II. METHODOLOGY OF FIELDWORK

In my project [13], I crafted an interview-based qualitative study to seek an understanding of the efforts made by the Chinese community in Penang to maintain Chinese heritage languages. 46 participants (33 males and 13 females), aged 30 and above, were recruited to participate in the study, with the criteria that they were able to speak any of the listed Chinese heritage languages above. These participants were chosen because they represented three distinctive generations within the Chinese community there: (1) generation 1 – age 70 and above, (2) generation 2 – age 50-69, and (3) generation 3 – age 30-49. Some of the participants completed their education at secondary schools while others graduated from universities. Additionally, they came from various socio-economic backgrounds, which reflected the different levels of socio-hierarchy of the Chinese community in Penang.

The participants were grouped into three categories: (1) official actors, (2) community-based actors, and (3) grassroots actors. The official actors were policymakers and representatives from government research institutes who played an important role in managing legislation at the macro level. The community-based actors were representatives from various Chinese associations and language promoters. Although they lacked the power to manage legislation, they played a crucial role in providing their opinions and supporting/promoting language-related activities at the meso level. The grassroots actors were individuals selected from five domains of education, home,

social, religion, and work. These individuals are significant in putting enforced laws into actions and managing language issue at the micro level.

The interviews were held in the office or home of the individuals and lasted approximately an hour. The language used during the interview was mainly English, which aligned with the writing of academic publications. However, some participants could not speak English and thus, they opted to use Hokkien or Cantonese. During the fieldwork, I learnt to differentiate my researcher position as an insider and outsider and unpacked ways to build relationship with the participants. Hence, I shall report them in the following section.

### III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

#### a. Researcher's Insider and Outsider Position

Giwa states that many Asian students who are trained abroad usually conduct their fieldwork in their home country as they are committed to bringing knowledge home [6]. In my case, I received a scholarship from a university in Australia to pursue my postgraduate studies. As I regarded myself as part of those Asian students, I decided to conduct my fieldwork with the Chinese community in my hometown, Penang. Penang offers a worthwhile site for the exploration of the social phenomena of language issue due to its long history of Chinese settlement and having a diverse linguistic ecology mentioned earlier.

My concern regarding the issue of maintaining Chinese heritage languages in this globalised era prompted me to choose my "home" as my research "field". When I returned "home", I was an insider researcher because I grew up in Penang. As part of the Chinese community, I was warmly welcomed to address this urgent language issue. When I was in the "field", I was an outsider researcher recruiting participants from the Chinese community for interviews. My identity of both an insider and outsider researcher in the "home" and "field" gave me great awareness of the language situation in Penang.

Being both an insider and outsider is challenging due to the complexities of "space of betweenness" that occur during fieldwork. In a fieldwork in Australia, Gibson acted as an insider who shared views with her participants regarding the music industry and simultaneously, she was an outsider conducting interviews regarding the issue studied [5]. Thus, she was aware of the "space of betweenness"

as both an insider and outsider researcher. In my case, I made use of my local culture knowledge to recruit the participants. I spoke in Malay, the sole official and national language of Malaysia, when entering government offices, leading to the appreciation of the language learnt at school. When conducting the interviews, it was not difficult to build a rapport with the participants because of their trust in me as part of the Chinese community. Hence, they were willing to engage in deep conversations and did not assume that I would misuse sensitive information. Their friendliness provided me with the advantage that an outsider researcher may not be able to achieve. In short, I often found myself positioned within the "space of betweenness" in both my "home" and the "field".

Despite the advantages mentioned, there were some drawbacks. As an insider, I had a priori assumptions and beliefs regarding the linguistic situation in my "home" and the protocol for recruiting participants. However, knowing the importance of research ethics, I relaxed those assumptions and beliefs during fieldwork. Flexibility in making connections has led me to recruit more participants than initially planned. At the end of each interview, I allowed the participants to freely discuss the investigated issue so that I could obtain background knowledge for data analysis. The point of emphasis is having those assumptions and beliefs will ultimately harm the research and thus, it is vital to drop them prior to fieldwork and always keep a "space of betweenness" so that building relationships with the community will be easier.

#### b. Ice-Breaking with a Friendly Conversation

In my project, I chose interviewing as my primary research method for various reasons [8]. First, it allows for and encourages a systematic attention to the research design. Second, it provides an in-depth understanding to the research problem. Third, it reveals the emotional dimension of social experience that cannot be captured through observation. Despite the advantages of using interviewing as research method, asking questions related to the research problem to strangers, who act as participants of a study, is different from conducting an ordinary interaction [8]. Indeed, conversations are a fundamental aspect of human interactions, and thus, cultural courses to teach people how to ask and answer questions are conducted to improve human interactions [2].

When conducting interviews with official actors, it was challenging because they were of a different social class as compared to my background. At the time of interviewing, I was a postgraduate student while they, in my opinion, were considered as important people having legislative roles in Penang and were frequently seen on the news. When contacting them, I provided my information letter to their secretaries and expressed my hope that they would cooperate and participate. The usual wait for a response was approximately two weeks before I heard from the secretaries. Those interested asked their secretaries to contact and give me an appointment time, date, and location for the interview. Dealing with them could arouse strong feelings and draw attention to political issues, leading me to become more nervous than usual. Thus, when meeting the policymakers, I put on my best attire to provide a good impression. I also arrived early prior to the interview and prepared myself with some background knowledge of their roles in the government administration.

One of the policymakers was four years my senior during my primary school days. I recognised her name but was not definitely sure. Hence, when meeting up, I confirmed if she studied at X primary school and was the head girl of her class. Following the confirmation, we spoke a little of those happy young days at school where we ran around the field and participated in the school's funfair, sports day, and other events. Coincidentally, she did her undergraduate studies in Australia and I was doing my graduate training there (during the time of the interview). Because we had commonality, we continued to talk about the weather, tourist sites, and multilingual issues in Australia. Such small talks eased the tension between us and subsequently, we proceeded with a friendly but focused interview session. The session led to both showing respect for each other's work. As I did not feel inferior with her status after the small talks, I had a better focus and managed to overcome my trepidation. In other words, the reflexive engagement between the participant (policymaker) and myself have served as a vehicle for social change. As Lorde puts it, "difference must not be merely tolerated, but seen as a fund of necessary polarities between which our creativity can spark like a dialectic" [9].

The lesson learnt is that engaging in small talks is important to break the tension between participant and researcher who are unfamiliar with each other. Such small talks are beneficial to avoid awkwardness,

which leads to showing respect for both parties and allowing sensitive and cautious interactions. It is also vital to listen and understand the participant and not rush in to conclude their opinions. Sometimes, it takes longer but it is crucial to remember that having patience usually develops into good working relationships.

### c. Being Flexible to Code-Switching

According to Blommaert and Jie, conducting fieldwork is a constant learning process and it is not unusual for a researcher to reflect on their mistakes [1]. Initially, I wanted to conduct the interviews in English because of its importance as a working language in Penang. I learned English as a subject in school and continued to use it at the university. Although I am a non-native English speaker, I have full proficiency in the language. As Penang is a multilingual city, the participants were assumed to be multilingual. With the policymakers and representatives from government research institutes, there were no issues conducting the interviews in English. All their interviews were smooth sailing.

However, with the representatives from the Chinese associations and some grassroots participants, things turned out to be more complicated. Many had limited knowledge of English and hence, they were more comfortable using Mandarin. Despite my Mandarin proficiency being limited, I had to react immediately to the participants as I did not recruit an interpreter to assist me. In one of the interviews, the participant asked for the reason why my proficiency in Mandarin was low. I explained to him that I was educated in a Malay-medium school and I only learnt how to speak Mandarin when I shared the university dormitory with Chinese ethnic students. Hence, my Mandarin vocabulary was limited. To assist me with understanding of the terms used and stories told during the interview, the participant kindly switched between English and Mandarin. He even reiterated some important statements in Hokkien so that I could fully grasp the meaning. When he did so, I felt more comfortable and was not lost in the code-switching process. During the process, we "creatively and strategically renegotiate[d] the norms for voice" [3]. In another instance, a participant code-switched between English and Cantonese, which gave me the opportunity to delve deeper into our discussion because I am a fluent Cantonese speaker, having learnt to speak the language from a young age. It was also during such instance that I appreciated my multilingual skill and was able to code-switch with my

participant, which resulted in a fruitful interview. Such experiences align with the lessons learnt from Taylor-Leech and Boon's fieldwork regarding understanding the complexity of multilingualism and making efforts to communicate in more than one language, leading to the opening of doors that are closed [19].

The lesson learnt is that accommodating to code-switching when meeting participants who have language issue is significant. It is necessary to acknowledge the complexity of conducting interviews in a multilingual setting because forcing the interviews to be conducted in only one language may result in the participants withdrawing and researcher losing key data. When meeting participants, a researcher should strive to communicate using a comfortable language to build trust and have mutual understanding. In this way, the participants and researcher will appreciate the symbolic and historical values of the language(s) used.

#### **d. Giving Back to the Community**

After completing interviewing, analysing of data, and writing of the thesis, the role of the researcher should not end there. It is important to report back those findings to the community studied because those participated in the study are usually those who are interested to learn about the project and keen to know the solutions. From the academic side, I presented my findings at many international conferences, sharing the research findings with scholars working on language maintenance and language shift issue. Some scholars engaged with me regarding similar issue faced by small communities in their researched countries while others provided me with feedback on improving my research findings and analysis. It was through these engagements and feedback that I delved further into issues such as children's language acquisition, family language policy, and linguistic landscape. As a result, I collaborated with several international scholars and began working together on these issues. At the time of writing this article, three of my collaborated papers have been accepted as forthcoming publications.

On the other end, I re-engaged with the Chinese community in Penang as a way of "giving back" after completing my graduate training in Australia. I contacted several non-profit organisations and briefed them regarding my project. As one of the organisations was interested, I shared my findings with their members. Several grassroots participants

who I previously interviewed also joined in. During the sharing session, I spoke about the language situation faced by the Chinese community in Penang, how the participants have perceived the use of Chinese heritage languages in everyday life, and what language maintenance efforts have been made so far at the three levels of organisations (macro, meso, and micro). I ended my presentation with ways to encourage them to speak Chinese heritage languages to their children and grandchildren. My presentation was well received by the members who were alerted regarding the present endangered situation of Chinese heritage languages. Subsequently, some members contacted me to further discuss about multilingual parenting and guidelines to support their children's learning of Chinese heritage languages. It was during these discussions that I personally felt rewarded as they gave me the satisfaction that went beyond academic achievement. With the invested time and efforts, it was clear that my findings did not only end up on papers through publications but were applied in real life situations. As Mushin and Gardner state, it is crucial to extend our connections beyond the academic community because the success of our research depends on good working relationships with those interviewed and the broader community [11].

The lesson learnt is that giving back to the community is valuable in ensuring of a successful relationship building and productive collaboration. A researcher's performance is usually measured by academic outputs, which is essential for professional success and survival in the academic world. Nevertheless, it is worthwhile remembering that without the community's participation, the project will not be successful. Therefore, it is salient to move beyond academic achievement and share the findings with the community and assist them with practical support. In this way, the researcher will begin to appreciate what lies ahead [7].

#### **IV. CONCLUSION**

In concluding the article, it is undeniable that a researcher will have a complex relationship both as an insider and an outsider during fieldwork, similar to my reflections and lessons learnt. It is easy to have presupposed rules of engagement as well as pragmatic and cultural norms when meeting and working with the community. However, as an ethical researcher, respect and care must be taken to ensure that successful relationships are built and a productive fieldwork is achieved.

In the three approaches discussed, I have demonstrated ways of building relationships that include having small talks, being flexible to code-switching, and giving back to the community. Through these approaches, I successfully conducted a fruitful fieldwork, which led my findings to demonstrate that the continuous use of Chinese heritage languages lies within the responsibility of the Chinese community in Penang. Therefore, as part of building relationships with the community, I strongly recommend them to continue speaking these languages to the younger generation so that these languages will continue to survive.

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