



A Report on My Reflections of Insider and Outsider Position during Fieldwork in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

The position of a researcher as both insider and outsider has been recognised as a fundamental issue in qualitative research because the credibility of research depends on the researcher's ability to reflect on and to be transparent about the methodological issues faced. Based on my fieldwork experience in Malaysia, this report provides an account of my reflections as an insider and outsider in the field. I discuss four issues using stories from my fieldwork: (1) field and home, (2) the "space of betweenness" when engaging with participants, (3) the interactions between participants and me during interviews, and (4) the drawbacks as an insider. These issues may impact on my interpretation of the findings and thus, I argue that it is important that a researcher exhibits a high degree of ethics and transparency regarding their position during fieldwork.

1. Introduction

The positioning of a researcher as an insider or outsider in the field is significant in qualitative research. According to Merriam, Johnson-Bailey, Lee, Kee, Ntseane, and Muhamad (2001), whether a researcher is considered as an insider or an outsider depends on the common features of a researcher and the participants in the community within the research site. An insider is a researcher who shares similar background characteristics, such as gender, ethnicity, race, and language belonging to a participating group, while an outsider is one who has different socioeconomic, historical, or ethnicity characteristics from the participants (Gair, 2012; Hayfield & Huxley, 2015; Rubin, 2012).

Scholars such as Kanuha (2000), Kusow (2003), and Merriam et al. (2001) state that insiders or outsiders in the field can experience advantages and disadvantages. An insider researcher usually gains easy access to the participants and is able to hold a more "open" interview with them within their community (Root, 1996). Some communities may hinder researchers who do not have any connection with them but are endeavouring to access hidden and closed information. In this case, an insider researcher has the advantage, leading to an in-depth understanding of the community studied. An insider researcher also has the ability to engage more effectively with the community while more easily respecting the cultural values and norms (Kusow, 2003). However, these benefits raise questions about objectivity and authenticity of the research because the insider researcher may have prior knowledge, which can bias the findings or cause the researcher to be too familiar with the community (Hellawell, 2006; Kanuha, 2000). Such a situation may affect the results of the research because the

information gained may be misrepresented (Labaree, 2002). At this point, an outsider researcher has more benefits because they are able to “stand back” and draw independent conclusions (Merriam et al., 2001). On the other hand, an outsider researcher may be criticised for a lack of understanding of the community studied, and this lack may play an unfavourable role in the research process. In short, the dilemma of an insider or outsider position in the field is unavoidable. Therefore, understanding the relevant dichotomies is useful in assisting a researcher to be aware of how the position of an insider or outsider can impact on the research process and interpretation of the findings.

In this report, I first give a description of the context of the fieldwork by stating the methodology used and the sociolinguistic background of the research site, Penang. Second, I provide my personal account of the co-existence of a researcher’s insider position (as a member of the Chinese community in Penang) and outsider position (as an academic researcher) based on my fieldwork in Penang. Third, I touch on the issue of how the position of an insider has helped me to efficiently conduct my fieldwork. Subsequently, I consider how the familiarity and trust existing between the participants and me are vital in mediating the interview. I also reflect on the language choices made by the participants in the interview and my response in catering for their choices. Last, examining some drawbacks as an insider researcher, I argue that while addressing the tensions and negotiations made during fieldwork, it is important to remind oneself of the position of an insider and outsider and to ensure a high degree of ethics and transparency throughout the research journey.

2. Context of the Fieldwork

In 2015, I began my research with the Chinese community in Malaysia. The impetus for this research interest was the communication difficulties, resulting from language policy shifts, that are currently taking place in many Malaysian Chinese families. This situation has developed because many Malaysian Chinese parents acknowledge the economic value of Mandarin Chinese and, consequently, send their children to Chinese-medium schools to receive a Chinese-medium education (Wang, 2014). Because they are concerned whether their children can “keep up” with the standard of Mandarin Chinese at school, these parents speak Mandarin Chinese to their children at home (Ting, 2006; Wang, 2016, 2017). This situation has resulted in a lack of opportunity for the children to learn their own variety of Chinese language (henceforth referred to in this report as “Chinese community languages”¹), such as Penang Hokkien, Cantonese, Hakka, Teochew, Hainan, and Taishan. As a consequence, most of these children have difficulties communicating with their grandparents and great-grandparents. As a member of the Malaysian Chinese community, I am aware of the situation, and this awareness motivated me to investigate the current state of Chinese community languages in my hometown, Penang. For part of my doctoral research, I wanted to explore the efforts in official language planning that have been made in relation to language maintenance in the Penang Chinese community and the extent to which these efforts are supported by the local community.

My research project involved 46 participants, aged 30 and above, who speak at least one of the Chinese community languages mentioned. They were selected from three groups: (1) official actors, (2) community-based actors, and (3) grassroots actors. The first group of participants, official actors, are policymakers and researchers from the government research institutes. They represent the Penang Government and play important roles in managing legislation. The second group of participants, community-based actors, are representatives from Chinese clan associations,² and language promoters.

¹ In this research, the term ‘community languages’ is defined as “immigrant languages used...to emphasise the legitimacy of their continuing existence” (Clyne, 1991, p. 215). It is adopted in preference of other terms, such as ‘mother tongues’ and ‘ethnic or minority languages’.

² Clan association in this context refers to a Chinese ethnolinguistic group, such as Hokkien or Cantonese, forming their own associations to help with issues related to accommodation, food, writing letters back to China, and arrangement for funerals (Yen, 1981). They usually originated from the same

Although they lack the power to manage laws, they act as a bridge to support and promote language-related activities within the local community. The third and final group of participants, grassroots actors, are individuals selected to represent the five domains³ of family, friendship, religion, education, and employment. As part of the Chinese community in Penang, they play vital roles in understanding the laws enforced by the government and putting them into action.

Wanting to connect my family language issue to the language situation in Penang, I crafted a semistructured, interview-based qualitative study designed to understand the efforts made for the maintenance of Chinese community languages. Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes. There were several reasons why I chose to conduct interviews (Arksey & Knight, 1999; Patton, 2002): first, interviews would allow me to find out what and how the participants think about Chinese community language maintenance in Penang, and discover things I could not directly observe; second, interviews would assist me to explore and understand my research in depth; and third, interviews could support those participants who were not fluent in writing to express their opinions.

To provide an understanding of the research site, I present some sociolinguistic and historical details: Penang is a multilingual, multiethnic, and multicultural state situated in Peninsular Malaysia. It is made up of two parts: Penang Island and Seberang Perai, with George Town as its capital city. The population of Penang is 1.76 million (Department of Statistics, 2018) and consists of Malays (42.3%), Chinese (39.4%), Indians (9.4%), and other ethnicities (8.9%). Bahasa Melayu, the sole national and official language of Malaysia (as instituted in the Federal Constitution of Malaysia), is also the official language of administration, education, and the legal system in Penang. English is taught in schools and used in most work places. Even though English is not an official language, it plays a pivotal role in Penang. The majority of Chinese in Penang represent the Chinese ethnolinguistic group, the Hokkiens, and make up approximately 64% of the overall Chinese population in Penang (Department of Statistics, 2010). They speak Penang Hokkien as their main medium of communication. Nevertheless, other Chinese community languages, such as Cantonese, Hakka, Hainan, Teochew, and Taishan, as well as Mandarin Chinese are also spoken by Penang's Chinese community.

The Chinese community's relationship with Chinese community languages began in their home country, China. The Chinese first set foot in Penang in the 17th century, when they escaped the Manchu invasion of Fujian Province, China. In 1786, Sir Francis Light officially founded Penang and established a free trading port in George Town. The port attracted many Chinese merchants to Penang because it allowed them to trade with Europeans and provided opportunities to expand trading activities. As trade flourished, it led the Chinese to settle and set up shops in George Town.⁴ The Chinese merchants also brought their community languages. With the establishment of the tin mining industry in Taiping, Perak, in the 18th century, more Chinese immigrants came to work as labourers. They then moved to bigger cities such as Penang to seek better jobs, and many eventually married and built homes in Penang. Most of the Chinese families in Penang have lived there for generations. This long-established history as a Chinese settlement provides Penang with a special cultural background for conducting the fieldwork.

3. Returning to Penang: “Field” and “Home”

Many students from Asia who are trained abroad, whether in the Northern or Southern hemisphere institutions, seek to return to their home countries for fieldwork (Giwa, 2015; Yakushko, Badiie,

village or province in China and spoke the same language.

³ The concept of domain, proposed by Joshua Fishman (1965), was employed in this research. It was mainly used to contextualise patterns of language use, language attitudes, and language choices in bilingual or multilingual communities. In this research, I adapted Fishman, Cooper, and Ma's (1971) five most important domains to suit the present-day investigation.

⁴ George Town is the capital of Penang.

Mallory, & Wang, 2011). Many are committed to the culture of learning and training abroad, then bringing the knowledge back to their homelands. I consider myself as part of this group of researchers. I grew up in Penang in a family of blue-collar workers. Due to my strong passion for linguistics, I decided to apply for a scholarship from abroad to pursue my doctoral study. I was fortunate to be given an opportunity to study in Australia. However, I remained strongly attached to my hometown and community, especially because through my family and friends, I was aware of the language situation in Penang.

The trip to “return home” for fieldwork in 2016 was exciting, providing me with the chance to escape from the endless reading and writing tasks in my PhD hub and to show my family and friends, as well as the Chinese community in Penang, that understanding maintenance efforts for Chinese community languages is an important issue in the field of language maintenance and language shift. However, I was aware that “doing fieldwork” at home would be challenging and, at times, the challenges may hinder me from realising the research aims and goals. I constantly reminded myself that conducting fieldwork in my hometown and with my own ethnic community would not be an easy task.

When I first designed my research, my colleagues asked where the fieldwork would take place. When I informed them that I would like to return home for fieldwork, they questioned me on how I would compare my hometown as both “field” and “home”. Katz (1994) contended that there should be no fixed boundary between “field” and “home” because the researcher should always consider themselves to be in the field. In other words, “home” can act as “field”, where the research takes place and knowledge is communicated. For Till (2001), while conducting fieldwork in Berlin, her “home” became “field”—she found that thoroughly knowing the city was useful to her research. She also revisited some of her favourite places in Berlin—in this case, Berlin became her “home”.

In the case of my research, Penang was my “home”; it is my hometown, where I grew up and went to school. Thus, I was considered as an insider because I was a resident in Penang and part of the Chinese community. Because Penang was my “home”, I had my connections with the Chinese community many of whom had lived there since birth. I also found myself familiar with the physical landscape of Penang—I knew the names of the streets and the shops in George Town, as well as the location of the offices of various Chinese clan associations. At the same time, Penang was also a “field”—it was the research site where I conducted my fieldwork. In the field, I was an outsider because I recruited participants from Penang’s Chinese community and conducted interviews with them to understand the language maintenance efforts.

In short, given the dual nature in which Penang had become both “home” and “field” in my research, I often found myself placed within the “space of betweenness”. The lesson learnt is that when I employed my “home” as “field”, I was an insider Chinese and simultaneously an outsider researcher. As an insider and outsider, I became fully aware of the current Chinese community language situation in Penang.

4. The Complexities of “Space of Betweenness”

The notion of “space of betweenness” during fieldwork is related to how a researcher is separated from the research process yet is still associated with it (Rose, 1997). In other words, this space allows a researcher to position themselves as both insider and outsider, rather than insider or outsider (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). Reflecting on their own fieldwork experiences, Gibson (2006), Rubin (2012), and Zhao (2017) stated that both insider and outsider positions constantly shift in a single research process. For example, Gibson (2006) found herself as an insider when sharing insights with participants regarding the Australian music industry and, at the same time, she was an outsider interviewing Indigenous musicians about their musical context. In such a situation, a researcher should be aware of and flexible

about their insider and outsider positions (Zhao, 2017).

According to Zhao (2017), working with the residents in a community is a common practice among many researchers who decide to return home to conduct fieldwork. In the case of my study, as a member of the Chinese community who grew up in Penang, I knew that they would welcome me home by accepting my invitation for interviews because they would consider me as part of their community and one who understands the Chinese culture and local practices. To gain access to the field, I made full use of my local knowledge to get in touch both with Penang Government policymakers and representatives from the Chinese clan associations. Moving around in Penang was not an issue because I knew the streets and suburbs well and had a car to drive to the interview locations. In addition, when I needed to speak in Bahasa Melayu to the secretaries in the government offices, I was able to do so because I am fluent in that language and was educated in Bahasa Melayu during my school days.

When I visited the policymakers in the government offices and the representatives from the Chinese clan associations, I was able to quickly establish a rapport with them because they trusted me as a Penangite and were enthusiastic about my study. My academic background as a doctoral student also afforded me a level of respect, and recognition that I was serious and passionate about my research. Due to the high level of familiarity and trust, these policymakers and representatives from the Chinese clan associations were willing to engage in an open interview and to disclose sensitive information regarding the legislation and implementation of the government policies. They did not treat me as an outsider researcher who intended to “steal” this sensitive information. Instead, they had lengthy discussions with me, and we all perceived the value of maintaining Chinese community languages in Penang. Moreover, they were keen to find strategies for raising community awareness regarding language maintenance. Their friendliness and positive engagement aligned with Kusek and Smiley’s (2014) claim that the position of an insider can provide the researcher with access to information that outsider researchers may not be able to gain.

Based on this experience, I knew the policymakers and Chinese clan representatives were gatekeepers in my fieldwork, and that positioned me as “a local resident and a researcher”. The lesson learnt is that the “space of betweenness” facilitated my research by allowing me to ethnically conduct interviews while maintaining a close but neutral stance between the participants and me. I also gained an understanding of my identity as a researcher and learnt about the fluidity and complexity of being simultaneously an insider and an outsider.

5. Interactions between Interviewees and Interviewer

Interviews played an important role in my research. As mentioned above, I recruited three groups of participants: (1) official actors, (2) community-based actors, and (3) grassroots actors. With the three groups of participants, I conducted semi-structured interviews. Before conducting the interviews, I prepared an interview guide in English⁶ for each group of participants. Some participants requested the guide in advance so that they could prepare for the interviews. In some cases where the participants were not fluent in English, I verbally translated the guide into their requested language during the interviewing process. By having the interview guide prepared, I, as a “researcher”, felt in control of the interviews rather than allowing the participants to discuss issues beyond the topic, and this led to fruitful interactions between the participants and me.

My language and cultural background as a Chinese growing up in Penang offered me many advantages in understanding the social norms, local cultural practices, and the different Chinese

⁵ Penangite is a local term to refer to the citizens of Penang.

⁶ The interview guide was prepared in English to align with the language used for the doctoral thesis.

community languages spoken within the community. In Chinese culture, the concept of ‘face’ is vital and related to social status (Lee-Wong, 2000). An individual may “lose face” when someone connected to the individual does not meet the social moral standards during conversations (Ho, 1976). Knowing the importance of the concept of “face” in Chinese culture, I was cautious when interviewing the participants and asking questions related to sensitive issues, such as politics and religion. This strategy ensured that the participants involved in my research, especially the high-ranked policymakers, did not “lose face”, which would break our rapport. In addition, it would also be unpleasant if the relationship between the participants and me “turned sour” during the interviews. Due to my considerate behaviour, I was introduced by those high-ranked policymakers to other contacts—Chinese community leaders. Such introduction helped me to obtain a more diversified pool of participants and build relationships for future research.

My ability to speak several languages was beneficial during the interviews. As a fluent speaker of two Chinese community languages, Penang Hokkien and Cantonese, together with Mandarin Chinese, English, and Bahasa Melayu, I was able to conduct all interviews without the help of interpreters. Moreover, with some older participants who could only speak either Penang Hokkien or Cantonese, it was a great opportunity to become closer to them and better understand the history of their families, the languages they spoke with their counterparts in China, the life they led during their youth, and the changes they observed in Malaysian politics before and after independence. Such interactions allowed me to gain an in-depth understanding of the language situation in Penang in the past and at present, and has helped me when analysing the data. Consequently, when frequent codeswitching and codemixing by the participants took place, I faced few challenges or language difficulties as a multilingual speaker. Such codeswitching and codemixing commonly occurs in a multilingual city such as Penang, and my ability to accommodate it has added authenticity to capturing the current state of Chinese community languages in Penang.

To sum up, using caution and care when conducting interviews was important in building relationships between the participants and me. In addition, being a multilingual speaker was also significant in my research in navigating the interviews and overcoming language challenges. The lesson learnt is that many sociolinguistic factors were involved during interactions between the participants and me but these factors were overcome by maintaining integrity and ethical behaviour. It is also important to find a way to connect participants and me in order to reach out for clarity in communication and to frame the links between one another’s language.

6. Drawbacks as an Insider

Ngaha (2016) mentioned that in the past, some researchers used to make false assumptions about what they observed. Such assumptions might be problematic (Hayfield & Huxley, 2015) because today, many communities who voluntarily participate in research would not tolerate such behaviour. If they know that researchers tend to have false assumptions about their communities, they would either not participate in the research, or withdraw during the research and not engage any further. Thus, it is important to not have assumptions when interacting with communities, especially when the researcher is an “insider” in the community. This situation is done to ensure an unbiased stance during analysis and interpretation of data.

In my case, as an “insider” in the Chinese community in Penang, it was hard not to maintain certain assumptions and beliefs about the Chinese community’s reaction towards the maintenance of the community languages. Such assumptions and beliefs were present because I have witnessed the language shift taking place in my own family, between my grandparents and their great-grandchildren. However, to ensure that ethical research was conducted, I constantly reminded myself before interviewing, and before coding and interpreting the interview transcripts, not to have a priori assumptions and beliefs about the maintenance issue of Penang’s Chinese community languages.

Holding a priori assumptions and beliefs may lead to interesting aspects of the data being overlooked or unintentionally neglected (LaSala, 2003). In addition, researchers may neglect to explore the examined issue in detail with participants during interviews because they have a priori assumptions and beliefs about it (LaSala, 2003).

Knowing that internal validity is an important feature in qualitative research as argued by Merriam (1998), and to avoid unnecessary criticisms about overlooked data, as stated by LaSala (2003), I did not take what I observed and explored for granted. Instead, I allowed my knowledge of this research topic to be discovered through the complexity of participants' interviews in order to present a comprehensive interpretation of the investigated phenomenon. By doing so, I found that some of the older generation members have adopted the trend of using Mandarin Chinese, and have taken the opportunity to learn Mandarin Chinese in order to communicate with their younger family members. Such findings have helped me to form my interpretation of the interview transcripts for the description of the "actual" language situation.

In short, the lesson learnt is that having false or a priori assumptions will "harm" the researcher. Participants may withdraw from the research and the interpretation of data in the next stage will not be accurate, leading to a biased analysis of the data. Thus, it is important to always be mindful that a researcher should not allow such assumptions to conceptualise their responses to the research and that they should be open to learning about their researched topics.

7. Takeaways from the Fieldwork

This report has narrated stories based on my fieldwork in Penang, Malaysia, in order to highlight four issues: (1) my insider and outsider position in the "field" and at "home", (2) the complexities of "space of betweenness", (3) the interactions between the participants and me during interviews, and (4) the drawbacks as an insider. These stories have shown that conducting research in one's own community was exciting and involving, yet challenging. There were many negotiations to be made before and during the research. These negotiations demonstrated the dynamics and complexities a researcher faced as an insider and outsider in the field. On certain occasions, the insider and outsider position might have overshadowed each other. Nevertheless, the "spaces of betweenness", where one's position was separated from and belonged to the research (Rose, 1997), facilitated the research journey. It also allowed the researcher to distance themselves from the participants, while providing a degree of flexibility to be represented ethically in the field.

In summing up, I argue that the challenges faced as both an insider and outsider in the field should be positively approached because they can be turned into great experiences. As for me, these challenges have created awareness in me when conducting fieldwork. Because of them, I have demonstrated an ethical behaviour and transparency as part of the Chinese community in Penang and as a researcher from Australia keen to investigate the efforts of Chinese community language maintenance. It was also an honour to learn about and understand the situation of the Chinese community languages and to find ways to give back to my own community.

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