



A Developing Community of Collaboration in Indiana

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INTRODUCTION

Everywhere humans interact, there is language: in schools and government offices, in songs and stories, in celebrations and mourning.¹ Through language we learn, discuss, and move to address the social and global

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issues that affect us. This chapter is co-authored by faculty and students, many of whom have expertise in linguistics, the scientific study of human language. While some of our work is abstract, we also care deeply about the human context of language. We often engage with questions such as the following: Who decides which languages are used to create resources? How do forcibly displaced people find information about novel threats like Covid-19? And, crucially, how can we use our expertise to respond to the language-related needs of such a community?

This chapter describes the model for community-engaged research developed by the Chin Languages Research Project (CLRP). Based at Indiana University in Bloomington, the CLRP is a collaboration between faculty and students in speech sciences, public health, and beyond. Some of us are members of the Burmese refugee community, primarily of Indianapolis. Our shared objective is to foster meaningful connections to support merging the pursuits of education, research, and service.

The CLRP model is a community-centered approach where faculty cultivate and support connections between linguistics students and undergraduate speakers of Chin languages (languages originally centered in Chin State in Burma).² We provide targeted mentoring for student team members, who work collaboratively to propose, conduct, and publish valuable research while simultaneously raising awareness about relevant issues and creating useful practical resources for community members (e.g., translations of Covid-19 and vaccine information).³ By adopting this model, we:

1. connect with and support a group of underrepresented, first-generation students;
2. impart contextualized, transferable scientific training;

²We use the term Burma throughout to refer to the country known globally as Burma/Myanmar, because this is the name preferred by most of our Chin team members.

³General information and examples of practical resources can be found at <https://www.chinlanguages.org/> and student-authored working papers can be found at <https://scholarworks.iu.edu/journals/index.php/iwpsalc>.

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3. foster meaningful connections between refugee community members and student linguists-in-training who are hungry to do community-based work;
4. conduct novel scientific research with a group of under-documented languages; and
5. rapidly adapt outreach initiatives to meet the community's evolving needs.

This chapter describes both CLRP and Linguistically Underserved Communities and Health (LUCAH), a joint project with the University of North Texas (UNT) and California State University, Fullerton (CSUF), that collects and analyzes in-language interviews about Covid-19, health, and wellness in the Central Indiana Burmese community. These interviews offer opportunities for linguistic data collection while illuminating the experiences of community members. Topics of discussion include conceptualizations of health, where to obtain health information, and personal experiences during the pandemic. In conclusion, we share key take-aways from our work about student learning through service and community-led research and suggest ways to adapt our project structure for use elsewhere, with different language communities.

The backdrop for CLRP is Indiana, current home of more than 25,000 Burmese refugees (Hoffmann 2018; Lotven et al. 2020). Many hail from Chin State in western Burma. The Chin community in Indianapolis consists of about 20,000 people (Salaz and Raymer 2020), up from 15,000 in 2016 (Bik 2016). It is linguistically rich—dozens of under- and undocumented languages, mostly from the Kuki-Chin subgroup of the Tibeto-Burman language family, are spoken there (Berkson et al. 2019).⁴ Some of these languages are spoken by hundreds or even thousands of Hoosiers (people from Indiana), yet no scientific inquiry has addressed them. The combined language knowledge of this community is more than enough to keep a team of linguistic researchers busy for several lifetimes. Further, the community has many and varied language needs—communication challenges arise in both urgent situations (e.g., emergency room visits,

⁴The Chin Community of Indiana (CCI), an Indianapolis-based non-profit, reports that for 305 people polled in November 2020, nineteen languages were reported as being used at home. While the eight most reported in that poll were Hakha, Falam, Burmese, Mizo, Mindat, Matu, Lautu (Lutuv), and Tedim (Bualteng 2000), we know that many others (such as Mara, Senthang, and Zotung) are also well represented.

the Covid-19 pandemic) and daily life (e.g., buying a car, getting a driver's license).

An hour south of the Indianapolis community is Indiana University Bloomington (IUB), whose Linguistics Department has long housed robust graduate and undergraduate programs as well as a history of training students in fieldwork with speakers of under-resourced languages. As more students from the Indianapolis Chin community enroll at IUB, a unique opportunity to blend mentorship, linguistic research, and practical experience has emerged. In response to this moment, we are building the Chin Languages Research Project. Our team includes Chin and non-Chin students and faculty who work closely together and strive to think creatively about *knowledge*, *expertise*, and *ability*. Each of us brings to the project distinct strengths and insights, and our work is strongest when we pool them. Our Chin student members have keen insights into community needs, rich life experiences with real-world language work (e.g., translation and interpretation), and a wealth of linguistic and cultural knowledge. Our non-Chin linguistics students have a burgeoning set of analytical tools and a desire to put their energy into addressing local, current, relevant needs. Faculty members contribute disciplinary and mentoring expertise and insight into navigating university systems.

While the CLRP is evolving in a specific geographic and scholarly context, such a model could exist in many other contexts. By bringing together students, community members, academic professionals, and representatives from local organizations, community needs can influence both classroom content and learning objectives. Figure 1 illustrates four major groups of stakeholders who are crucial to the success of such endeavors.

These stakeholders bring diverse viewpoints, skills, interests, and priorities to the table, thereby enriching team discussions and decision-making. The CLRP, which began in 2018, currently includes 15 to 20 active members, with another 10 to 15 more loosely involved in advising, research, and mentoring. Non-Chin undergraduate linguistics majors support research efforts while cultivating their own skills. Chin students act as the vital communication link between the research community and the refugee community; they also gain transferable research skills and influence project directions. Graduate students gain research and mentoring experience, for example, conducting dissertation research while serving as project managers. Faculty members impart contextualized, transferable scientific training and serve as allies for students navigating unfamiliar university systems. Administrators help identify funding opportunities to

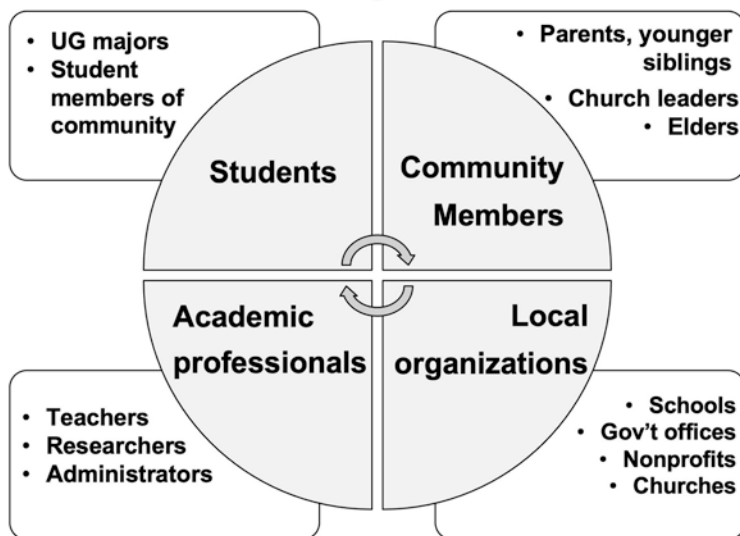


Fig. 1 Stakeholders in communities of collaboration

support undergraduate research training. Local organizations and community members identify specific needs, host events, redirect team efforts in response to changing community needs, and spread information. Projects developed and executed by these diverse partners are necessarily motivated by their varied, local, and relevant concerns.

Many languages are spoken in the Indianapolis community. To date, the CLRP has worked most intensively with Hakha Lai (AKA Hakha Chin or Laiholh), a language of wider communication in both Chin State and Indianapolis (Barron et al. 2007). Our best guess is that it is spoken by 10,000 or more people in Indiana, including several authors of this chapter. We also work with Lutuv (aka Lautu) and Zophei, spoken, respectively, by several hundred and several thousand people in Indianapolis (Berkson et al. 2019; Lotven et al. 2020). Community members tend to be highly multilingual, often speaking many Chin languages—two, three, or even as many as five to ten languages in the case of parents and elders. This degree of multilingualism is stunning to many Americans, and as linguists we perceive the community as immeasurably rich. The wider Indiana population is mostly unaware of this linguistic wealth. Many

Hoosiers do not even know that Indiana has such a large resident Burmese community, let alone such linguistic diversity.

Moreover, our view of *language knowledge as valuable* runs counter to many of our students' lived experiences. Language barriers are everywhere and often prohibitive, making a huge challenge of many everyday experiences (e.g., schooling, job-seeking, interactions with health and government officials). Consider the medical context. Burmese interpreters are the second most requested in Indianapolis (after Spanish), but those requests are very often for speakers of Burmese—not Chin languages—despite the fact that many Chin community members do not speak Burmese (Zart, p.c.). Speakers of Hakha Lai have endured long waits for interpreters to arrive at medical appointments only to find that the interpreter speaks only Burmese, a particular danger in medical emergencies. Requests are also made for Chin interpretation and/or translation, as though Chin is a single language rather than a large group of diverse languages. We observe this not to condemn those who make such requests—they are simply unaware that the community is so diverse and rich in language knowledge. Accordingly, one of CLRP's most basic ongoing goals is to raise awareness that Central Indiana is a language hotspot.

CLRP project choices are driven by student, faculty, and community interests. In March 2020, as the Covid-19 pandemic intensified, Chin student team members raised concerns about lack of access to reliable public health information in Chin languages. Like so many others, we pivoted overnight to a focus on Covid-19. CLRP projects paused, prioritizing translation and dissemination of Covid-19 information for Indiana's Chin communities. These efforts are detailed on our website (see footnote 3). We also began LUCAH, a pandemic-related project which brought together CLRP infrastructure with the language documentation and linguistic expertise of our collaborators. LUCAH activities model how fieldwork, outreach, research, service, language documentation, and student empowerment can be vital parts of a collaborative effort.

CASE STUDY: THE LUCAH PROJECT

LUCAH grew out of a partnership between CLRP team members in Indiana and faculty researchers from UNT (Shobhana Chelliah, Sara Champlin) and CSFU (Kenneth Van Bik). These partners have brought concerns of documentary linguistics, public health information dissemination, and experience with Chin languages to the CLRP's

community-engaged translation work and language research in an effort to address issues of language and public health raised by the pandemic. The unprecedented circumstances of Covid-19 have meant that health, wellness, and risk prevention/management are, for the moment, front and center in peoples' minds. The pandemic has again demonstrated that access to health information is not equitable for everyone in the United States. There are 7000 or more languages on the planet. Creating accurate and understandable information resources about a novel virus is a tall order in a single language, let alone thousands. Adding to this challenge is the fact that we very often fail to understand the specific cultural practices and beliefs that influence how people process and engage with health information. These issues are at the heart of the LUCAH project, informing the design of our objectives and methodology and characterizing our intentions for the project's contributions and outcomes.

LUCAH has twin objectives: (1) to improve community health outcomes by gaining insight into how members of the Indianapolis Chin community access, engage with, and interpret public health information and services, and (2) to create a unique corpus of richly detailed linguistic information in the form of conversational interviews. These objectives arise from our collective experiences and from the special circumstances that inform our project. First, while translation of written public health information materials has been a goal of many organizations during the pandemic, the same visual information is often used across cultures and languages, ignoring the differences in lived experiences and perceptions held by different groups while diluting or obscuring intended messages. Our work will contribute to the design of culturally tailored visual health messages. Conversations about public health are rarely collected in language documentation projects, but they are a natural topic to pursue now because speakers of all languages are navigating a global pandemic. We aim to increase our understanding of Chin perceptions of health and health literacy while contributing broadly to the development of best practices for health messaging during public health emergencies. The conversational data gathered in our interviews also serve as a productive resource from which we can develop a corpus that will allow us to learn *about* Hakha Lai *in* Hakha Lai and support future community-based linguistic research.

We have adopted a number of novel methodological approaches to ensure that the project makes both practical (Objective 1) and scholarly (Objective 2) contributions. In this project, undergraduate CLRP team

members, who are native speakers of Hakha Lai, play the key roles of conducting interviews and processing interview data. We gather information through conversational-style interviews rather than surveys and questionnaires. That information is transcribed and translated by native-speaker team members, meaning that we can privilege the language of interviewees. We've learned through other linguistic work that much can be lost in translation when a bridge language such as English is used for interviews (Everett 2001; Flood and Rohloff 2018); interviewers who are from the community or well-known to interviewees get longer, more candid, and more varied responses (Cukor-Avila 2005). Because student training and empowerment always inform our decisions, students are trained in recording, transcribing, translating, archiving, and analyzing the highly emotive connected speech that they themselves collect. We have also developed protocols for collecting data virtually via video calls. Though necessitated by the pandemic, these protocols may widen the scope of future research and be useful in any research settings where in-person interviews are not tenable due to prohibitive travel costs, globally dispersed diaspora communities, or government restrictions such as those imposed after the recent military coup in Burma.

Our methods serve as a model for future community collaboration and research and can be replicated for use with other non-English-speaking groups within the U.S. and internationally. It is useful for people working in any area that intersects with forced migration (public health, education, etc.) to cultivate awareness that *language diversity is the norm, not the exception*. Recall that some Hoosiers do not know that many of our Burmese neighbors are Chin, let alone that the term "Chin" does not refer to a homogenous group, but rather a richly diverse community of dozens of cultures and languages.

Similar diversity can be found all over the world. Who lives in your community? Which languages are spoken, and how can you learn about them? On this point, we cannot overemphasize the importance of our student members. Undergraduate members of many institutions have invaluable linguistic and cultural insight into their own communities, bringing to the table unparalleled knowledge. In research such as LUCAH, they can gain scientific training and experience, influence research project direction, and create rich corpora of information.

We are developing free online resources that offer training in our language documentation methodology, designed for both academic and nonacademic audiences. Project findings and materials, including a corpus

of interlinear glossed texts, will be archived and publicly available at UNT's Computational Resource for South Asian Languages Archive (CoRSAL). By sharing our materials freely, we hope to encourage teams working on other issues to adopt similar methods.

This project serves all four groups of stakeholders identified in Fig. 1 by incorporating the larger needs of the community, using the expertise of academic professionals, involving students in novel research methods, treating students as the crucial research partners they are, and sharing information with local organizations. This model of integrated collaboration helps ensure that our research is meaningful. Student development is woven into *all aspects* of the work. Undergraduate Chin students have gained firsthand experience with the research process, participating in project planning and interview guide development and gaining training in interviewing, transcription, and translation. They have served their own communities by listening to and amplifying the voices of those around them, disseminating *their* information and learning from *their* experiences.

DISCUSSION AND SUGGESTED READINGS

We are often asked how other undergraduates can become involved in work like ours. To answer this, we again raise the idea of thinking creatively about *knowledge*, *expertise*, and *ability*. Large projects like LUCAH require a team with diverse skills, voices, and experiences. If you are an undergraduate student reading this right now, we invite you to step back and think objectively about your skills—don't think about what you don't know, but rather focus on things that you *do* know and *can* learn. Recognize and value the knowledge of those around you, including language mastery. Be conscious, too, that knowledge is not static—seek to increase your knowledge by listening to those around you.

This is our strongest advice: *be a good listener, pay attention to those around you, and seek to learn new things*. We expand on this below.

Be informed. Students who have experienced forced migration have deep ties to other places. Who lives near you? Who attends your school? Learn about your neighbors and the current events that matter to them. For example, a military coup is occurring in Burma as we write this chapter. The IUB student government recently passed a resolution recognizing and supporting our Burmese students. *How does the diversity in your community present opportunities for challenges to be addressed and for collaborative work to be discovered?*

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Recognize that language is knowledge. What languages are represented in your classroom, school, city, and state? Consider this knowledge with regard to college language requirements (e.g., *you must study a foreign language as part of your degree*). Often colleges have an option for fluent speakers of other languages to test out those requirements, thereby saving a tremendous amount of time, money, and energy for students who are already multilingual. This option may not be available for speakers of all languages, however—testing opportunities may exist for more widely spoken languages (e.g., Spanish) but not lesser-known languages (e.g., Hakha Lai). At IUB, we are now able to offer proficiency testing for Hakha Lai, Falam Chin (aka Falam tong), and Burmese, which is very useful for our students. *What rules are in place at your school? Are they equitable? (Hint: need help finding people who can help perform language assessments for specific minoritized languages? Linguists and language specialists at your school or elsewhere can probably help!)*

Do not tie research support to GPAs. It is valuable for all of us, faculty and students alike, to consider that numerous factors affect GPAs. Forced migration very often interrupts schooling, and there are challenges inherent in completing education through the medium of a new (perhaps a third or fourth) language. GPAs communicate nothing about students' existing language knowledge, their abilities, or their capacity for research. *Lower GPAs should not preclude involvement in paid research opportunities. To support diversification of the academy and encourage participation of underrepresented groups, we must find ways to make engaging in research financially feasible. Can you identify funding options that are not tied to GPA?*

Be aware. Activities sometimes seen as a regular part of college are not feasible for all students, especially unpaid internships and volunteer research assistantships. Students who are supporting themselves and their families cannot engage in unpaid work. For us, this means that faculty members devote regular time to seeking funds to support student team members. Students who want to do linguistic research apply for research support so that they can pay the speakers with whom they work. Language knowledge is valuable; language research is work. The best way to convey this in the U.S. system is by ensuring that language work is seen as a paying job. *Valuing students' time and knowledge means finding ways to pay them for all of their work. We must commit to examining critically how we determine what "counts" as work.*

Be responsive. Get engaged with and become informed about the communities around you. Here in Indiana, we find that many people don't know that Burma is a country of many different ethnic groups, let alone that the Chin community contains many different groups speaking varied languages. The best way to combat ignorance is to be present and to learn. Joining community events—when invited—is a crucial part of being a good team member. For example, in non-COVID times the IUB team regularly attends Indianapolis events like the Chin National Day celebrations. These are both fun and educational. Students who are engaged in the community are more engaged in the research. *Find ways to learn about those around you. Becoming informed is one step toward being a better neighbor. Read what you can; pay attention to local newspapers and magazines, which often feature local interest stories. If there are events within the community that are open to the public, attend! If you get invited to such events, take up the offer.*

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Be an intentional student. We emphasize the importance of becoming more informed. A practical way to do this is to be an intentional student: actively try to make your schoolwork relevant to your local community. One of our linguistics students taking a history class could choose to study the history of Burma for a final paper, for instance.

When planning for final projects or term papers, find ways to focus on topics related to the research you are doing or the community with whom you are working. Once your project is done, find other outlets to share your work and spread the word.

Form alliances. Teamwork truly lightens the burden. One of our team members is passionate about developing literacy materials for her native language, Lutuv. A linguistics student has become a key ally, helping to draft books, illustrating, and also engaging with scholarly work on literacy efforts. Their efforts are now shared, and both team members are enlivened by having an ally—a teammate with common interests and objectives.⁵ *Find others who also want to get involved, for example, fellow undergraduates or researchers in other disciplines who would be interested in your work. If classmates who have experienced forced migration have projects that they are passionate about, work to be a good listener and learn if there are ways you can support their efforts.*

We have touched on several topics in this chapter. To learn more about language documentation, see Chelliah (2021), *Why Language Documentation Matters*; for language diversity and endangerment, see Harrison (2010), *The Last Speakers: The Quest to Save the World's Most Endangered languages*; and for public health messaging, see Dutta (2008), *Communicating Health: A Culture-centered Approach*.

Increasingly, people from different age groups and walks of life want to engage in work that feels immediately relevant to the lived experiences of students and community members. Communities of collaboration enable this because they involve a broad range of people who have distinct skills acquired through unique life experiences. We hope that our community inspires others to employ similar methods. This includes prioritizing community voices, addressing community-defined needs, focusing on the language(s) of the community, and recognizing the unique strengths and knowledge held by student members of diaspora communities. With the CLRP and LUCAH, we hope to model and define new ways to mingle language and academic expertise and, in doing so, to address the needs of displaced and marginalized peoples while reinforcing the value of these communities. There is linguistic and cultural wealth all around you. Can you see it?

⁵See books created by Par and Matthews at <https://www.chinlanguages.org/lutuv-literacy>.

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