

Role of Chabacano Language in Shaping Cultural Identity Among Generation Z in Ternate, Cavite

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Abstract

Chabacano language is a cultural heritage of Ternate, Cavite. It is a creole language originated from Moluccas during the time of European colonization. This paper explores the role of Chabacano language in shaping cultural identity among Generation Z in Ternate. To answer this, the researcher utilized Descriptive design using semi-structured interview. The participants of this study were carefully selected using Purposive sampling with the following criteria: (1) the participant must be a native of Ternate, (2) the participant must be a Chabacano speaker, and (3) the participant must be a Generation Z student of Ternate. The data were gathered through Messenger and Gmail. For the data analysis, the researcher used Thematic Analysis and generated 5 major themes. The findings show that Generation Z in Ternate show great interest in preserving Chabacano language, they find this language a marker of their cultural identity. In addition, they also acknowledge the importance of Chabacano language in community gatherings such as family events, cultural and religious festivals. The researcher recommend that Millennials and Generation Z should receive regular Chabacano Language Preservation Program through seminars for them to preserve the language effectively. The researcher also recommends the utilization of Chabacano Research among local schools and college in Ternate.

Keywords: Chabacano Language



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INTRODUCTION

Ternate originated in the 1600s when the Spaniards transferred Christianized Mardicas in the Moluccas (Ternate Island, Indonesia) to Elsewhere in the Philippines to avoid Dutch tyranny (Rafael, 1978). These migrants were resettled on an island it is now called Ternate, Cavite and also contributed their military and cultural efforts to enhance the strengthening of the Spanish influence in the region. It retained the name Ternate, because it was a reminder of their homeland and culture. The Spanish missionaries, especially the Jesuits, set up missions in Ternate and in the process were trying to Christianize Mardicas and become a part of the colonial Philippine society. Through these missions religious and educational infrastructures were established in the town. They helped shape a distinctive spiritual culture among the natives, and the customs of which remain present to this day in the fiestas and the church based community lives (Crailsheim, 2022). The Mardicas were considered to be military servitors of the Spanish crown especially on the defense front of Moro pirates attacks on the coastal areas (Alip, 2019). They were armed as a militia in strategic locations and places such as Ternate to assist in securing sea routes and nests. This rendered them crucial in the safety and extension of the Spanish colonial rule.

Ternate is unique as one of municipalities in the Philippines where Chabacano, a Spanish-based creole is still spoken. Ternate, an Indonesian and Tagalog influenced variant is regarded as threatened. In line with the current battles by the local communities to save it, scholars cite its value as the Philippine language diversity (Lipski, 2013). Standing close to the Manila Bay and the West Philippine Sea, Ternate had great value as a military and naval location in the past.

The importance of this region at the strategic level was realized by the Spanish, American, and even Japanese forces as they used it as an area of defense on the coast (Jose, 1998). There are still old fortifications and watchtowers around Ternate which serve as silent testimonies of its maritime past. According to Perez (2015), the Christianized Moluccans migration to the island of Ternate in the colonial past of the Spanish period arrived with a mixed-breed cultural influence of the Austronesian, Iberian and Malay culture. The result of this migration is one of the distinctive socio-cultural identities that can still be identified even nowadays such as in music, cuisine, religious adherence and system of families in Ternate. Chabacano language developed in the form of a pidgin language derived as a simplified variant of Spanish that was adapted to communicating with Spanish colonizers and indigenous people who were not able to speak Spanish (Fernandez & Sippola, 2017). As time progressed this pidgin would become richer and more sustained to the extent that it became a creole language where it became a native language to a group of people. The development of Chabacano was necessitated by a need; the Spanish government was in need of a means to communicate with the indigenous workers, soldiers, and servants, particularly, in garrisons and mission settlements. It is mainly Spanish in vocabulary, most definitely influenced in grammar and syntax by indigenous Philippine languages.

Chabacano is being classified as a creole language, specifically Spanish based- which makes it unique especially among the Philippines and the whole of Asia. Being a creole, it has various important differences with the standard Spanish, particularly, in the form of grammar. Although Chabacano has a majority of words of Spanish origins, it adheres to sentence structure and grammar of Austronesian languages, including Tagalog, Cebuano, and Hiligaynon (Barrios & Bernardo, 2012). An example of this is that verbs are not conjugated as they would be in Spanish but rather with the use of markers such as *ta*, *ya*, *ay* to mark tense. This creole grammar adapted the language to local speakers but not to the extent of being inaccessible to Spanish speakers, however, it allowed having enough quantity of Spanish words to fulfil the colonial purpose. Chabacano has a number of localised versions, most of which have their own peculiarities conditioned by the local languages they were in contact with. The three most distinguishing ones are Zamboangueo, Caviteneno and Ternateneno. The strongest and most common form today is Zamboangueo Chabacano, which is used in Zamboanga City (Himoro & Pareja-Lora, 2022). Cavite and Cavite death tongue Cavite is spoken in Cavite province, although considered endangered because it is increasingly unused. The different variants represent the distinct combination of the Spanish with the native potent Philippine language of Zamboangueo, Caviteneno, and Ternateneno, so it is a source of pronunciation, word use, and expressions variations.

A study done by Lear (2023) revealed that Zamboangueño Chabacano is the language most spoken and supported by institutions. Locals use it in everyday communication, local media, during church services, in music, and even in education in Zamboanga City. It is also nicknamed the Latin City of Asia due to the robust Hispanic influence it derives. One reason why Zamboangueo has survived is its perpetual use over the generations and use in communal life. Its vibrancy has also been kept alive by the efforts by local governments, schools, and cultural groups. Zamboangueo ; based on the various types of Chabacano, this version is said to be the most progressive with a more extensive vocabulary and formal style of use. In contrast, as claimed by Lipski (2012), Chabacano grammar differs greatly with the Spanish despite the massive appropriation of Spanish terms. It has no gender of nouns and complicated verb forms like those of Spanish. It is based on subject verb object (SVO) sentence structure that conforms to the Philippine language pattern. Also, Chabacano has taken native discourse particles and the

reduplication mechanisms present in Philippine tongues Even though Chabacano derives around 60-80 percent of its vocabulary roots to Spanish, it also has acquired Tagalog, Cebuano, Hiligaynon and even English words. Terms used to relate to family, religion, government, as well as everyday life are more or less Spanish, whereas the terms associated with the environment, emotions, or technologies of the modern world can be of local or English origin (Tobar Delgado, 2020). This is one of the lexical convergences of Chabacano, developed within different language contexts in which it emerged. Remarkably, there is also a great variety of Spanish words that get simplified phonetically in Chabacano that fits the phonology of Philippine languages.

Although rich in history, Chabacano is in serious danger especially inside Cavite and Ternate as the population of those who speak Chabacano fluently is slowly dying off. In younger generations in the regions, Tagalog or English is more preferred and understood due to educational and employment convenience. Unless there are efforts to preserve them, these varieties could even go extinct. Bisaya, Tagalog and English, even in Zamboanga City, endanger purity and use of Chabacano due to their popularity. The overall language shift, urbanization, and the prevalence of national languages are the clear main reasons for the decrease of the less widespread variants of Chabacano (Lesho & Sippola, 2023). Recently, Chabacano has come back in the light of revitalization and maintenance, especially in Ternate and Zamboanga. The language has also been included at the elementary level in local government units in the mother tongue-based multilingual education (MTB-MLE) programs (Saavedra & Karanain, 2022). This study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. How does the Chabacano language contribute to the cultural identity of Generation Z residents of Ternate?
2. In what ways is the Chabacano language integrated into the cultural practices and traditions of Ternate?
3. How is the Chabacano language used in the daily lives and interactions of Generation Z residents of Ternate?

METHODOLOGY

This study utilized a Qualitative method using Descriptive design. The participants were selected using Purposive Sampling with these inclusion criteria: (1) the participant must be a native of Ternate, (2) the participant must be a Chabacano speaker, and (3) the participant must be a Generation Z student of Ternate. The researcher selected the participants carefully with a consideration of the scope of his study, the researcher made sure that they are suitable to be the correct participants of the interview. The researcher also utilized Semi-structured interview using Messenger and Gmail, to consider the availability and interest of the participants, the researcher asked them that they are free to choose the medium where they can submit their answers from the interview. The researcher also made sure that the responses of the participants are highly confidential and protected, the participants were informed that they can withdraw their answers anytime as long as the study is not yet published. For data analysis, the researcher used Thematic Analysis, and generated 5 themes from the semi-structured interview.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study identified five major themes that illustrate how the Chabacano language functions within the cultural identity, social fabric, and daily lives of Ternateños. These themes emerged from participants' perceptions and reflections on language use, tradition, and generational change.

Theme 1: Chabacano as a Symbol of Cultural Identity

Participants strongly emphasized the role of Chabacano as a symbol of their cultural identity. Most of the participants show pride, belongingness and connection with Chabacano language. They expressed that Chabacano as a language is a marker of their cultural identity as local residents of Ternate. Some participants even answered that it is more than culture, it is their personal life. This theme confirms that for many Ternateños, speaking or understanding Chabacano is truly being part of Ternate's cultural identity.

Participant 1 expressed pride in being among the few youth fluent in Chabacano, saying:

"For me, Chabacano language makes me proud to be apart because only a few can really understand and speak the language. That's why I am proud that I get to learn and see others' perspectives in the language. Being one of few people in Ternate especially at my age that get to learn and speak Chabacano feels great overall."

This sentiment was also expressed by Participant 2, who tied language to ancestral roots:

"Chabacano is a big part of who I am. It connects me to my roots, to my ancestors, and to the history of Ternate. Speaking Chabacano reminds me that I belong to a unique community."

Participant 3 associated the Chabacano language in historical resilience:

"The Chabacano language means a deep connection to my roots and cultural identity. It's a reminder of our unique history, blending Spanish and Filipino influences. When I hear or speak Chabacano, I feel proud of my heritage and the resilience of our ancestors who preserved it through generations."

Participant 4 simply noted:

"Part of my heritage."

For Participants 5 and 6, the language is not only cultural, it is personal:

"Ito ay parte na ng pagkatao ko dahil lumaki ako sa isang environment na ang wika lang ay Chabacano." (P5)

"Para sakín ang Chabacano ay parte na ng pagkatao ko o nating mga Ternateño. Doon ko nararamdaman na Ternateño talaga ako. Parang proud ako tuwing ginagamit ko siya." (P6)

James (2023) concludes that language plays a huge part of one's cultural identity, the sense of belongingness to a certain culture starts with language, it actually defines a group of people and labelled as an ethnic group. But, language is not only a defining variable but also a cultural identify that defines not only the ethnicity but most importantly one's roots. In addition, Wang (2021) sees that language has an important role as a medium for the oral traditions, folklore, and historical narratives that define a cultural group or ethnicity. The Chabacano language in Ternate serves as a bridge to preserve the identity of its culture, it is a necessary tool for communication, cultural festivals, religious festivals and also literary narratives to keep the culture alive in the town of Ternate. Surprisingly, most of the participants believes that Chabacano language symbolizes their own cultural identity, they believe that Chabacano is the mark of being the people of Ternate.

Theme 2: Language Preservation as a Cultural Responsibility

A strong sense of urgency and responsibility was felt among participants regarding the need to preserve Chabacano. Many viewed the language as endangered and saw themselves as

stewards of its survival. Many participants expressed their fear of losing their native Chabacano language. These findings show that the participants understand the importance of Chabacano language in their lives and community. The participants are also aware that their language is in danger. Their statements reflect a shared understanding that preserving Chabacano is not just a cultural preference, it is their duty.

Participant 1 emphasized the rarity of the language in the modern era:

"It is very important for us to preserve the language because I believe that it's one of those languages that is rare nowadays, especially in this new generation that we are in. We as Ternateños should be proud of the Chabacano language because we are one of the places where it is introduced and known for."

Participant 2 added a deeper warning about cultural erasure:

"It's very important. If we lose our language, we also lose the stories, traditions, and values tied to it. Preserving Chabacano helps us keep our culture alive for future generations."

Similarly, Participant 3 connected language loss with cultural death:

"It is very important for me to preserve the Chabacano language because it carries our history, identity, and traditions. Keeping it alive means keeping our culture alive for future generations."

From Participant 5:

"Sobrang importante. Dahil kung di ito mapapangalagaan para sa mga susunod na henerasyon, walang saysay ang pagiging Ternateño kung wala ang wikang Chabacano."

Participant 6 stressed the danger of disuse:

"Importante siya kasi kung hindi natin gagamitin, baka mawala siya. Sayang kasi parte na yan ng history natin."

As studied by Astorga et al. (2025), there is an obvious decline of Chabacano speakers among Generation Z in Ternate and Cavite City. They found out that there are three main factors for this decline; first one is the media usage because many Generation Z students consume media in English and Tagalog but not in Chabacano, the second main factor is the Family whereas Chabacano language is not consistently use at home, parents tend to use Tagalog most of the time. Lastly, they found out that Chabacano language is not being used as a medium of instruction at schools. This phenomenon also happens in Mindanao, based on the study of Robiego et al. (2022), there is also an obvious decline of Manobo Speakers in Mindanao, and they found out that the factors are low self-esteem of their members and due to modern advancements. However, they noted that Manobo community preserve their language by putting emphasis on the role of family and by using minority languages in many domains. These explain the context of Chabacano in Ternate, The participants of this study are fully aware that there is a decline of Chabacano speakers, most of them also express the importance of preserving Chabacano language.

Theme 3: Chabacano in Cultural Practices and Ceremonial Life

Chabacano is not only spoken in private but also serves an important role in public and ceremonial life. It is especially prevalent in traditional events like fiestas, religious gatherings, and storytelling sessions. The participants expressed the significance of Chabacano language in

the cultural practices of Ternate people. The emotional and symbolic power of the language in public rituals confirms its role in reinforcing Ternateño community values.

Participant 2 described its use in religious activities:

“Traditional songs or prayers during town fiestas are a good example. These moments feel more genuine and sincere when Chabacano is used since it expresses our common identity.”

Participant 3 explained how the language enhances the emotional impact of communal celebrations:

“One cultural tradition where Chabacano is used is during local fiestas and religious events in Ternate. Prayers, songs, and announcements are often delivered in Chabacano, which makes the celebration more meaningful and connects the community to their roots. It shows the language’s role in preserving unity and cultural identity.”

Participant 4 was brief but affirming:

“Fiestas, it’s used there.”

Participant 5 pointed to family settings as meaningful spaces for Chabacano use:

“Pag may mga family issues or private matter ang pamilya na talagang nakakapag-communicate kami using the language Chabacano lalo na pag nasa public kami.”

Participant 6 reflected:

“Tuwing may fiesta or mga traditional events, madalas Chabacano talaga ang ginagamit lalo na sa mga dasal at awit. Mas meaningful siya pakinggan.”

Ande (2025) noted that in Dawan community, cultural and religious ceremonial activities are important conduit to transfer social and moral values such as respect, cooperation and collectivism. Dawan community tend to use their local language in doing their rituals and ceremonies, this practice helps the elders to transfer their culture to younger generations. According to Astorga (2024), Ternate ties with strong religious community, they value religious activities and beliefs a lot. It is reported up until now the people of Ternate still hold a strong belief in folk practices ties with Christian beliefs. With this, the participants show appreciation with the utilization of Chabacano language in important gatherings such as religious festivals and family related gatherings in Ternate. They confirm that Ternate still holds its strong cultural identity together with the help of Chabacano language.

Theme 4: Language as a Social Bond and Inclusion Tool

Chabacano was described as a way to build emotional and social closeness. Using it in interactions, whether among elders or peers, fostered a sense of unity and comfort. These testimonies suggest that Chabacano is more than just a cultural marker, it is a bridge that links people across generations and social groups, building intimacy, familiarity, and community.

Participant 1 shared:

“It’s great because those who are not fluent in the language get to learn and experience more as they interact with those who are fluent in Chabacano, and it helps bring us closer and for the language to be known and not forgotten.”

Participant 2 reflected:

"I feel closer to the occasion and those around me as a result. Every time we utilize our language during festivities, it fosters a sense of pride and solidarity."

Participant 3 shared a similar feeling:

"Using Chabacano in cultural events makes me feel more connected and involved. It helps me understand the meaning behind the traditions and strengthens my pride in our heritage."

Participant 5 added:

"I think 'yun is yung pakikihalubilo sa matatanda na and sa family mo na talagang lumaki sa pagsasalita ng Chabacano."

Mouboua et al. (2024) believe that in the increasingly interconnected world, language serves as an important tool to bridge diversity of culture and mutual respect. They acknowledge that language takes the most important part of connecting people in a community. In addition, as studied by Astorga et al. (2025), parental involvement has a great effect in Chabacano language learning, they found out that the more that the parents practice Chabacano at home to bond with their children, the more language learning that their children receive. They also noted that parents at home hold the most important role in Chabacano preservation, whereas, language starts at home. Chabacano-speaking parents should practice Chabacano at home when talking with their children. With this, Chabacano language serves as a language of bond within the community.

Theme 5: Challenges to Fluency and Digital Use

Despite their cultural pride, participants acknowledged practical challenges, especially the dominance of Tagalog and English, and the limited use of Chabacano in online settings. These accounts reflect a gap between the desire to use the language and the practical limitations of modern communication. The pressure to conform to more widely used languages online may limit younger Ternateños' confidence and fluency in Chabacano, accelerating its decline.

Participant 1 noted:

"Honestly, I want to use it daily because I want to enhance my vocabulary more, and expand my knowledge in Chabacano language, because I am not yet fluent but I do understand the language fluently."

Participant 3 observed:

"I rarely use it now, but I understand it and use it when needed."

"No, I don't usually use Chabacano online because most people I talk to use Filipino or English. It's easier to be understood that way. But sometimes I use it when I have conversations with my friends."

Participant 6 explained:

"Minsan lang, lalo na kung ka-chat ko taga-Ternate din. Pero madalas Tagalog o English kasi para maintindihan ng iba."

According to Abdumannovna (2025), digital media has an impact with the language evolution. The digital media for communication removes the traditional language boundaries.

This language change with digital world brought not only linguistically shift but also cultural. Digital media is a new normal form of communication, it can surely affects the behavior of users in language usage. Astorga et al. (2025) also reported that media consumption is the main factor for the decline of Gen Z Chabacano speakers in Ternate. It is reported that social media influences the Gen Z of Ternate to adopt English and Tagalog as their primary language. This finding aligns with the responses of the participants about the Challenges of Digital Media to Chabacano preservation.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings, most of the participants believe that Chabacano language symbolizes their cultural identity. They also express their appreciation and love for Chabacano language as a mark of their Ternate's culture. In addition to this, it is worth-noting that these participants show great interest in preserving the Chabacano language in Ternate, they mentioned that Chabacano preservation is their responsibility and they show strong willingness to preserve it as they believe that this language is their identity as citizens of the town of Ternate. It can also be noticed that most of the participants see Chabacano language as an important part of their cultural events such as religious festivals, cultural festivals and also family gatherings. They believe that Chabacano language keeps the bond and solidarity of their community. They express appreciation of utilizing Chabacano in social gatherings. Most importantly, the participants mention that they are experiencing language challenges pose by the digital media consumption. They acknowledge that media usage influences their speaking skills in Chabacano language negatively. They express that while using social media in dealing with people, they tend to use Tagalog or English. With these findings, it can be concluded that Chabacano language is an important part of Ternate culture and history. This language faces danger among younger generations. However, the participants show great appreciation and interest to the Chabacano language which indicates a positive outcomes in the future. To preserve the Chabacano language in Ternate, the researcher recommends that regular seminars in Chabacano Preservation Education for Millenials and Gen Z should be utilized. Local Government Unit, Sangguniang Kabataan (SK) and together with local schools can start this initiative. It can also recommended that local senior high schools and college in Ternate should encourage their student-researchers to pursue Chabacano research and engage in active research publications in Chabacano.

The novelty of this study lies in its focus on the Chabacano language as an active agent in shaping cultural identity among Generation Z in Ternate, Cavite, a demographic and geographic context that remains underexplored in sociolinguistic research. Unlike earlier studies that predominantly examine Chabacano from historical, structural, or preservation-oriented perspectives, this research critically investigates how language use, attitudes, and hybrid linguistic practices among Gen Z mediate identity formation amid globalization, digital communication, and shifting cultural affiliations. By situating Chabacano within everyday social interactions, online spaces, and intergenerational dynamics, the study fills a significant gap in the literature on minority languages and youth identity, while extending theoretical discussions on language, identity, and cultural continuity. This approach contributes empirically by foregrounding youth voices and conceptually by demonstrating how heritage languages can be re-signified as dynamic cultural resources rather than static symbols of tradition in contemporary society.

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