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TOPIC: EXTENT OF FORMAL USE OF IBAN AMONG THE IBAN COMMUNITY IN SARAWAK

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Introduction

- ❖ In a complex multilingual ecosystem of Malaysia, indigenous languages are **gradually losing their domains** due to the threat of economically and politically powerful languages, i.e. Bahasa Malaysia and English (McLellan, 2014); **the Iban language is not spared** either.
- ❖ The **Iban people** are **indigenous to Sarawak**, but now they are **found all over Malaysia**, where they **migrated** from their homeland to urban areas for **academic, work and personal reasons**.
- ❖ In Sarawak, **the Iban people** compose the **largest ethnic group** with a population of 723,400 out of the state population of 2.813 million in 2022 (Economic Planning Unit, Sarawak, 2022).
- ❖ As the largest indigenous group in Sarawak, it is **expected** that the **Iban language** would have **high vitality** but **empirical evidence** is showing **otherwise**.
- ❖ To date, only Ting, Tinggang, and Metom (2020), as well as Metom, Ting and Ling (2021) have carried out **studies** on **the vitality of the Iban language**.
- ❖ Research findings reveal that Iban has only **a medium vitality** in some areas in Sarawak even though the localities are densely populated by the Iban people (Ting et al., 2021).

- ❖ In the **Ethnologue Expanded Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (EGIDS)**, the vitality (and conversely the endangerment) of a language is rated on a scale from **0 (International)** to **10 (Extinct)**.
- ❖ For indigenous languages, the challenge is to have **an orthography**, which **allows the language to be written and potentially taught in schools** and used in other **formal contexts**.
- ❖ **EGIDS Level 5 (developing)** means that a language is in **vigorous use** if the literature in a **standardised form** is used by some though this is not yet widespread or sustainable.
- ❖ The **Iban has an orthography** – in fact, Ting and Ling (2012) placed the Iban language at **Level 5 based on their study among Iban teenagers**, mainly because there is **some institutional support for written literacy** in the Iban language.
- ❖ The next vitality **Level 4** describes **an educational language** that is in **vigorous use**, with **standardisation and literature** being sustained through **a widespread system of institutionally supported education**.
- ❖ The **question** is whether **Iban will ever reach EGIDS Level 3** to be considered a language of wider communication, that is, the language is used in **work and mass media** without official status to transcend **language differences across a region**.
- ❖ For Iban to be used in the **employment and mass media domains**, it is **necessary** for other ethnic groups to have **mastery of the Iban language**.

- ❖ It is **difficult** for Iban to reach **EGIDS Level 2 (provincial)** and **Level 1 (national)** because it needs to be used within **major government administrative units** and since the Iban people are mostly located in Sarawak, it is **not relevant** to expect Iban usage to extend to such a high level in formal usage.
- ❖ In fact, the use of Iban **outside the home domains have shrunk**, whereby Iban is **losing out to English and Sarawak Malay** in several domains, namely, friends, classmates, workmates, prayers, public places, and market (Metom et al., 2021); however, the results **do not give an indication** of whether Iban has been used in **formal settings** such as meetings.
- ❖ There is a **potential** for the Iban language to function as **a language for wider communication** in **formal settings** because it has **an orthography**.
- ❖ The presence of Iban's orthography facilitated **the formal teaching of Iban in Malaysian schools since 1968**.
- ❖ Today, there should be many Iban people who have **learnt to read and write in Iban**, and not merely communicate orally in it.
- ❖ However, the questions arise on whether the Iban people have the **written literacy** in **the Iban language** to use it for **formal communication**, and whether there are **occasions** for the Iban language to be used for such purposes.

Research Question and Objectives

- As the Iban language is **perceived to be vital** in Sarawak due to the **speakers' numerical dominance** and **assumption of written literacy**, to what extent is the ethnic language being used in **formal communication** in the state?
- Hence, the study aimed to investigate the **extent of formal use of Iban among the Iban community of Sarawak**, Malaysia.
- Objectives of the study:
 - ❖ to determine the **means for learning Iban**;
 - ❖ to examine the **level of language skills in Iban**;
 - ❖ to obtain reports of **availability of materials for language education and literacy in Iban**; and
 - ❖ to examine the **frequency of formal use of Iban**.

Methods of the Study - Participants

- ❖ This **descriptive study** was conducted in **Sarawak, Malaysia**.
- ❖ **Sarawak** is located in the Northwest of Borneo, bordered by the Indonesian province of Kalimantan to the south, the Malaysian state of Sabah to the northeast and Brunei to the north.
- **Respondents' demographics**
 - ❖ **Total number of respondents** in the study: 1,204
 - ❖ **Respondents**: 63.70% (or 767) - non-Iban dominant areas (Kuching, Samarahan, Betong, Limbang, Sibuluan, and Sarikei); and 36.30% (or 437) - Iban dominant areas (Sri Aman, Miri, Saratok, Lubok Antu, and Kapit)
 - ❖ **Gender**: 53.1% female (639) and 46.9% male (46.9).
 - ❖ **Age**: 19 years old and below to 60 years old and above, with the largest number of participants aged 20-29 years old
 - ❖ **Marital status**: 40.7% (490) – single; 55.2% (665) – married; and 4.1% (49) – divorced/widow/widower
 - ❖ **Religion**: 92.5% (1114) – Christians
 - ❖ **Occupations**: 43.5% (524) – government servants; 25.8% (311) – workers in private sectors
 - ❖ **Monthly income**: ranging from less than RM2,000 to RM10,000 and above; some respondents were not working, they were either students or unemployed
 - ❖ **Educational background**: 59.4% or 715 – most of the respondents were at least degree holders

Instrument - Questionnaire

- ❖ A set of **questionnaire** was developed - prepared in **dual languages**, i.e. English and Malay.
- ❖ 80 items, categorised into **11 Sections**, tailored to **UNESCO's evaluative nine factors** for assessing **language vitality and endangerment** (Brenzinger et al., 2003).
- ❖ For the purpose of this paper, results for only **three factors** (Factors 6, 7, and 9) are reported, which are the **means for learning Iban, the level of language skills in Iban, availability of materials for language education and literacy in Iban**, as well as **formal use of Iban**.



Data Collection and Analysis

- ❖ The **survey data** were collected in **March 2021**.
- ❖ An **online Google questionnaire** was sent to **potential respondents** by the first researcher through their phone contacts, emails, and WhatsApp messages.
- ❖ The data were then analysed and reported using **frequencies and percentages** using the **Excel spread sheet** and the **Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software**.



RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

(1) Means for Learning Iban

- ❖ Iban was **mostly learnt informally** rather than formally.
- ❖ 91.20% of the respondents reported **Iban** was their **first language spoken as a child**.
- ❖ 94.60% (1,139) of the respondents **first learned Iban** from their **parents**.
- ❖ 53.90% of the respondents **took the Iban subject in school**, ranging from primary 6 to the degree level.
- ❖ 46.76% (563) of the respondents **had no children** and 53.24% (641) **had children**.
- ❖ From the 641 respondents who had children – 427 (66.61%) respondents reported that their **children did not learn Iban in school** and only 214 (33.39%) respondents **sent their children** for **formal Iban education**.
- ❖ Seemingly, the **percentage of Iban people learning Iban formally in school** may be on the **decline**, whereby 53.90% of the respondents themselves had taken the Iban subject in school but only 33.39% of their children are taking the Iban subject in school.

Table 1. Respondents' acquisition of the Iban language

Acquisition of the Iban language		Frequency n=1204	Percentage %
Language first spoken as a child	Iban	1098	91.20
How did you first learn Iban?	From my parents	1139	94.60
Did you learn Iban in school? If yes, what is the highest level?	Did not learn Iban in school	555	46.10
Do/Did your children learn Iban in school? If yes, what is the highest level?	I have no children	563	46.76
	My children did not learn Iban in school	427	35.47

- ❖ It will be **difficult for Iban** to reach **EGIDS Level 3** to be considered **a language of wider communication** because the Iban people themselves **would not have the written literacy levels** that are needed to use Iban in **formal communication**.
- ❖ Even though Iban is offered as a Pupil's Own Language (POL) in Sarawak's government schools, **not many** of the respondents **sent their children to learn Iban in schools**.
- ❖ Iban is offered as an **elective module** – **not compulsory** for the Iban students to learn it in school (Barghi, Zakaria, Hamzah, & Hashim, 2017; Coluzzi, 2016).
- ❖ There is **a lack of interest** in acquiring the ethnic language in **formal setting** – probably due to the **lack of instrumental or economic values of Iban**.
- ❖ The acquisition of **Standard Malay** as **the first official language** (i.e., the national language) and **English** as **the second official language** (i.e., the international language) in Malaysia is **perceived as more vital than learning Iban**.
- ❖ The **declining interest in formal learning of Iban** is expected; many indigenous speech communities are **shifting away from their mother tongues** as they identify **no economic value** in their native languages (David et al., 2009).

(2) Language Skills in Iban

- ❖ The results show that the **Iban respondents** reported a **good command** of their indigenous language but there were more with **oral skills than written skills** in Iban.
- ❖ 93.51% of the respondents could **speak Iban fluently**, while 96.26% of them could **easily follow conversations in Iban**.
- ❖ Although 46.10% of the respondents **did not learn the Iban language in school**, they reported that they were **competent in Iban**.
- ❖ The **means** by which they acquired the language is **informally at home** from talking with their **grandparents and parents**, which indicates **intergenerational language transmission**.
- ❖ However, the **informal learning of Iban** means that they are **only able to use it for oral communication**.

- ❖ For **written literacy in Iban**, a majority of the respondents also claimed that they could **easily understand** the **contents** of books, newspapers, articles, and magazines in Iban (88.54%), and could **easily write anything in Iban** (82.23%).
- ❖ However, there are already about **11%** of them who were **unable to read written materials in Iban** and about **18%** of the Iban respondents who were **unable to write in Iban**.
- ❖ The results suggest that **not the full Iban community** has the **literacy of Iban** and this makes it **difficult** for the Iban language to **gain traction as the language for formal communication in employment and other domains**.
- ❖ In this light, the **language skills** results indicate that it will be **difficult for Iban to reach EGIDS Level 3** to be considered **a language of wider communication**.



Table 2. Language skills in Iban

Items		Total n =1204	Percentage %
I can speak fluently in Iban.	Agree	359	29.81
	Strongly Agree	767	63.70
I can easily follow a conversation in Iban.	Agree	304	25.25
	Strongly Agree	855	71.01
I can easily understand the contents of books, newspapers, articles, and magazines in Iban.	Agree	465	38.62
	Strongly Agree	601	49.92
I can easily write anything in Iban.	Agree	473	39.29
	Strongly Agree	517	42.94

(3) Availability of Materials for Language Education and Literacy in Iban

- ❖ Based on the results, it **cannot be assumed** that the respondents are frequently reading them.
- ❖ Over 70% of the Iban respondents – **had read printed materials in Iban**, stating the **Bible** as the **most often read material** (39.04%).
- ❖ 40.03% of the respondents **owned Iban dictionaries at home**; 43.53% of the respondents **had Iban books in their possession** at home for studying Iban (e.g. textbooks and grammar books).
- ❖ Half of the respondents (50.99%) **kept Iban story books at home**.
- ❖ Some of the written materials in Iban could have been **bought** when they were learning Iban in school (e.g. dictionaries and grammar books), and they **would not be referring to these materials** once their formal learning of Iban ends.
- ❖ Having **an Iban Bible** suggests that **the Christians may read the Bible every day** but they may own **English and Malay Bibles**, which they **may read more often** than their Iban Bible because the Iban Christians tend to go to churches that conduct their services in either **English or Malay**.

- ❖ The percentages of Iban respondents **owning various written materials** in Iban extend at most to **about half of the group studied** – not high.
- ❖ Since many Iban people migrate from their heritage homeland and live in urban areas, as well as marry other ethnic groups, the **use of Iban** seemingly **declines** as dominant languages (English, Standard Malay, and Sarawak Malay) are **more useful than their mother tongue for interethnic communication** (Ting & Campbell, 2017).
- ❖ The **lack of interest to own education and literacy materials in Iban** – probably due to **a lack of variety in written materials in Iban** – **insufficient** to meet the reading interests of the Iban community.
- ❖ There are **some magazines in Iban** that are **privately owned and published**, e.g. *Pegari*, *Kenarau*, and *Bangka*; to date, **only the *Pegari* magazine is available on a regular publication basis in Iban.**
- ❖ However, the **readership** may consist **mainly of those Iban who are interested to learn the culture and traditions of the Iban**, and the **Iban youngsters may not be** in this category of readers.



- ❖ Half of the Iban respondents have **some audio-visual materials in Iban**.
- ❖ 43.44% of the respondents **owned Iban magazines at home**; 53.07% of the respondents **kept audio recordings in Iban at home**; 55.56% of the respondents have **video recordings in Iban at home**.
- ❖ Iban **reading materials are available at the local stores**, e.g. Iban magazines and story books; however, the **diversity of publications** in Iban is **lacking**, and there are also **limited audio and video materials** that may suggest the **low percentage of possession** among the respondents.
- ❖ The Iban language **does not have any platform** like a language foundation for researching and publishing works on the language (Philip, 2017).

Table 3. Availability of materials for language education and literacy

Items	Copies	Total n =1204	Percentage %
Which of these printed materials in Iban do you most often read?	None	308	25.58
	Bible	470	39.04
	Magazines	71	5.90
	Newspapers	143	11.88
	Story Books	127	10.55
	Textbooks	85	7.06
How many Iban dictionaries do you have at home?	None	722	59.97
	1-5 copies	452	37.54
	6-10 copies	21	1.74
	11-15 copies	3	0.25
	16-20 copies	3	0.25
	More than 20 copies	3	0.25
How many Iban books for studying Iban (e.g., textbooks, grammar books) do you have at home?	None	680	56.48
	1-5 copies	372	30.90
	6-10 copies	87	7.23
	11-15 copies	32	2.66
	16-20 copies	7	0.58
	More than 20 copies	26	2.16
How many Iban story books do you have at home?	None	590	49.00
	1-5 copies	403	33.47
	6-10 copies	118	9.80
	11-15 copies	37	3.07
	16-20 copies	10	0.83
	More than 20 copies	46	3.82

Table 4. Type and quality of Iban materials at home

Items	Copies	Total n =1204	Percentage %
How many Iban magazines do you have at home?	None	681	56.56
	1-5 copies	334	27.74
	6-10 copies	84	6.98
	11-15 copies	38	3.16
	16-20 copies	23	1.91
	More than 20 copies	44	3.65
How many audio recordings in Iban do you have at home?	None	565	46.93
	1-5 copies	272	22.59
	6-10 copies	84	6.98
	11-15 copies	36	2.99
	16-20 copies	29	2.41
	More than 20 copies	218	18.10
How many video recordings in Iban do you have at home?	None	535	44.44
	1-5 copies	265	22.01
	6-10 copies	99	8.22
	11-15 copies	43	3.57
	16-20 copies	37	3.07
	More than 20 copies	225	18.69

(4) Frequency of Formal Use of Iban

- ❖ The results – **infrequent use of Iban as a formal language**, e.g. for conducting meetings attended by members of the Iban community.
- ❖ Only **28.65% of the respondents** attended **kindergartens using Iban** as the medium of instruction.
- ❖ Even though the Iban people make up **the largest ethnic group in Sarawak**, the ethnic language is **hardly used** by the **kindergarten teachers** in the teaching and learning processes at the pre-school level.
- ❖ A **majority** of the respondents who were parents **did not choose to enrol their children to study the Iban subject in school**.
- ❖ The Iban learners may be **reluctant** to learn the language formally in schools or pursue the training to be Iban teachers since learning other **dominant languages**, such as Malay and English, is deemed **more important**.
- ❖ The **enforcement of Malay and English** as the media of **school instructions for teaching and learning** has **minimised the usage of Iban in schools** (Ting & Campbell, 2017).



- ❖ Only 23.51% of the respondents **attended meetings** conducted in **Iban**.
- ❖ School meetings are often conducted in **Malay or English** since they are the **official languages** that cater to **wider intercultural communication**.
- ❖ The **lack of Iban usage** in **school meetings** – due to its **low status language**, Iban is **mainly spoken among family members at home** – **limited functions** as compared to Malay and English that are **economically and politically powerful languages** (McLellan, 2014).
- ❖ The use of Iban in school meetings **may not be practical** because **other ethnic groups do not understand or speak Iban**.
- ❖ 68.27% of the respondents reported that the **Iban community groups promote the written use** of the Iban language.
- ❖ However, while the promotion efforts **may be in place**, the **uptake by the Iban community may not be as desired**.
- ❖ This is reflected in **less than a quarter of the respondents** having the experience of attending meetings conducted in Iban.



- ❖ 21.42% of the respondents agreed that there are **enough Iban teachers for teaching the Iban subject in schools** – a **shortage** of teachers to teach Iban.
- ❖ This shortage will **affect efforts to improve the Iban language proficiency** among the **younger generation of Sarawak** (Muyang, 2019).
- ❖ Iban people **can train to be teachers of Iban** in two teachers' institutes in Sarawak and in Universiti Pendidikan sultan Idris.
- ❖ However, the **strong promotion of Malay and English in Malaysia's language policy** contributes to the **lack of qualified Iban language teachers in schools** (David et al., 2009; Omar & Teoh, 1994).
- ❖ The **influence of local Malay** and **pedagogical challenges** in motivating students to learn the Iban language are the **contributing factors** towards the **decline of Iban in Sarawak** (Umbat, 2020).

- ❖ Availability of radio programmes and television news in Iban – **available throughout the week.**
- ❖ There are radio programmes in Iban broadcast over **Radio Television Malaysia (RTM)** through **WaiFM Station** and **Cat's Radio** – among the most popular online radio stations in Malaysia, with live streaming of 24 hours on their online radio programmes – serving as **avenues for promoting the Iban language use.**
- ❖ **Television Sarawak (TVS)**, a new television channel based in Sarawak, also broadcasts **news in Iban** with the same purpose of **promoting the ethnic language in Sarawak**, aired twice daily at 11 a.m. and 7 p.m.
- ❖ However, it needs to be noted that Iban programmes on radio and television channels only develop **spoken skills in Iban.**
- ❖ For Iban **to attain EGIDS Level 3** to become **a language of wider communication**, the more important area is **avenues** for the **written use of Iban.**

- ❖ Currently, there are several **Sarawak-based publications**, e.g. *Utusan Malaysia* and The Borneo Post, which have **Iban language sections**.
- ❖ Even though there is the establishment of **Tun Jugah Foundation** (a private organisation) that has carried out preservation works on the Iban language and culture, there is **lack of effort** in developing language resources for **reading materials** from **the Iban community** (Philip, 2017).
- ❖ The **Iban community** contributes **minimal effort** in developing **Iban reading materials** (Embas, 2017).
- ❖ Thus, the findings suggest **low confidence** in the **potential status of Iban** as an **official language** due to **inadequate** written materials for resources in Iban.

Conclusion

- ❖ The present study examined the **prevailing conditions** to find out **whether the Iban language** has the **necessary societal support on literacy** to advance from EGIDS Level 4 (educational) to Level 3 (language for wider communication).
- ❖ The Iban respondents were **competent in Iban** as they learned it **informally at home** through **intergenerational language transmission**, but the **mastery is restricted to oral skills**.
- ❖ The findings – **not enough written and audio-visual materials in Iban** to support their **literacy**.
- ❖ Thus, it is not surprising that Iban is **hardly used** in **formal context** (e.g. meetings), which are more commonly conducted in **Malay or English**.
- ❖ Based on the Iban respondents' experiences of using Iban for formal use and written use, it is **difficult** for Iban to advance to EGIDS Level 3 to **be considered a language of wider communication across ethnic groups**.
- ❖ Limitation of the study - **only focused on the perceptions of the respondents** on the extent of formal use of Iban among the Iban community in Sarawak; future research should focus on **language acquisition, language planning, and documentation efforts** carried out by the **government and the Iban people** in uplifting the vernacular status of Iban.



Thank you!