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Formal Use of the Iban Language among the Iban Community in Sarawak, Malaysia

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The Iban language of Sarawak is an indigenous language that has an orthography and has been taught as a subject in Malaysian schools since 1968. However, no findings are available on whether Iban is used for written and formal communication. This study examined the extent of the formal use of Iban among the Iban community. Questionnaire data from 1,204 Iban respondents showed that mastery of Iban is acquired through informal language acquisition rather than formal learning. The percentage of those learning Iban in school dropped from the parents' generation (53.90%) to the children's generation (33.39%). Over 93% of the respondents could understand and speak Iban fluently, 88.54% could read in Iban, and 82.23% could write in Iban. The radio plays a bigger role in promoting Iban use among the respondents than the television. The sources of support for the written use of Iban are formal education, printed and audio-visual materials such as selected newspapers and magazines, and community groups. However, only 23.51% of the respondents had the experience of attending meetings conducted in Iban. The findings suggest low confidence for Iban to serve formal functions of communication not because of proficiency issues but due to lack of official status.

1. Introduction

In Malaysia, Iban is among the handful of indigenous languages that has an orthography and is privileged to be taught as a subject in government schools. In Sarawak, Iban is taught formally in both primary and secondary schools to cater to the largest ethnic group in the state (Philip 2017; Ting & Campbell 2017). In the neighbouring Malaysian state of Sabah, Kadazandusun has been taught as a subject in government schools since 1997 (Smith 2003). In West Malaysia, Semai is taught in some primary schools, where the indigenous group is concentrated (David et al. 2009). Malaysia's educational policy allows for the teaching and learning of indigenous languages or the Pupil's Own Language on the condition that there are at least fifteen students in a class (David et al. 2009). Parents are required to apply for the indigenous language to be offered as a subject. In some cases, despite a sufficient number of students, the indigenous language cannot be offered in a particular school due to the shortage of teachers.

In the context of Sarawak, Iban is the indigenous language with the greatest potential to be used in formal contexts, such as in meetings and reports, because it has a written orthography and is being taught as a subject in school. The regional variation is minimal for Iban, where the differences are most prominent in the accent, which facilitate the process of language standardisation. Many other indigenous languages remain oral languages without a standard orthography. Examples are the Kejaman, Sihan, Dusun, and Bidayuh languages of Sarawak which are acquired predominantly through informal learning at home via intergenerational language transmission (see Mohamed & Hashim 2012; Chuchu & Noorashid 2015; Coluzzi 2016; Joan & Ting 2016;). The Iban language has been taught as a subject in Malaysian schools since 1968, in contrast to other indigenous languages in Sarawak such as Bidayuh and Melanau, which are still in the formative stages in language standardisation due to the lack of mutual intelligibility of language varieties. In the context of language preservation and promotion, a written language has more vitality and is less likely to be endangered compared to oral languages.

As the language of the largest indigenous group in Sarawak, the Iban language could be expected to have high vitality. However, empirical evidence is showing otherwise. Iban has only a medium vitality in Song, a remote town in Sarawak, even though over 87.55% of the people living in the town are Iban (Ting et al. 2021) This is because outside the home, the use of Iban is restricted mainly to the domains of religion, friendship, market, and buying-and-selling transactions due to the growing prominence of English and Malay (both Standard Malay and Sarawak Malay). In the employment domain in Song, 17.4% of Iban respondents speak Iban with their bosses, 45.3% with colleagues, and 67.4% with subordinates. In Iban-dominant areas, Iban is still frequently used by at least one-third of the Iban respondents except in public places like post offices, hospitals and markets, but in non-Iban-dominant areas Iban use is largely restricted to family and neighbours (Metom et al. 2021). In the workplace, the language is used by 25% of the Iban respondents in Iban-dominant areas and by only 13.3% of the respondents in non-Iban-dominant areas (Metom et al. 2021). Similarly, Mis (2011) reported that 14.26% of 1,374 respondents spoke Iban in banking transactions in the Sarikei area. The Iban people made up 50% of the population in Sarikei at the time of his study. There was a study by Coluzzi (2010) but it was conducted in Brunei where Iban is a minority group (20,000 or 5% of the Brunei population) and Iban is hardly used compared with Brunei Malay. These studies show that the use of Iban in the employment domain drops as the Iban population decreases in the town.

Our literature search showed a dearth of studies on the specifics of Iban literacy because researchers tend to report language use by domain, and disregard the differences in the formal and informal use of the language. Thus far, the reports of Iban use are largely for informal use in the employment domain. There are no data on the use of Iban for formal communication such as for conducting meetings and events or writing minutes of meetings and reports. Since Iban has an orthography and is an educational language, it fulfils the pre-requisites for it to be used for written communication in formal settings, at least within the Iban community. In addition, Iban is the largest ethnic group in Sarawak. Since Iban people are distributed throughout the state, numerical dominance is on their side. The question is whether the Iban people themselves have the necessary mastery of Iban and are using it for formal communication. Empirical data on the formal use of Iban at the micro level provide the evidence that is needed to gauge whether a written indigenous language can develop into a language of wider communication.

The present study investigated the extent of formal use of Iban among the Iban community of Sarawak, Malaysia. The aspects studied were the respondents' means for learning Iban, level of language skills in Iban, possession of materials for language education and literacy in Iban; and frequency of formal use of Iban.

2. Background on the Iban

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. In Sarawak, the Iban is the largest ethnic group with a population of 723,400 (or 25.7%) out of the state population of 2.813 million in 2022. Population statistics for the other ethnic groups are as follows: Chinese (619,900 or 22.04%), Malay (607,800 or 21.61%), Bidayuh (197,000 or 7.00%), Melanau (133,400 or 4.74%), and Other Indigenous (141,200 or 5.02%) (Economic Planning Unit, Sarawak, 2022). The Iban people are indigenous to Sarawak but now they are found all over Malaysia, including Peninsular Malaysia where they migrated for academic, work, and personal reasons. Some Iban have also migrated to Brunei (King & Knudsen 2021). In the past, the Iban people were concentrated in certain towns like Sibul, Kapit, Song, and Kanowit. Compared with the language of the Bidayuh, the Iban language has little regional variation, and this enables Iban people to speak it with one another easily. It also makes it easier for other ethnic groups to learn and speak Iban. For example, the Chinese living in Song can speak Iban, and may use it when conversing with Iban people.

For indigenous languages, one major challenge is to have an orthography, which allows the language to be written, potentially taught in schools, and used in other formal contexts. Among the indigenous languages in Sarawak, Iban is the earliest to have a standard orthography and textbooks in the language. Iban has also been the only indigenous language taught as a subject in Sarawak schools. The grammar of the Iban language spoken in Sarawak was described four decades ago by Omar (1981). However, the number of students learning Iban formally in school is decreasing in secondary schools, but now it is also taught as an elective subject in some Malaysian universities such as Universiti Malaysia Sarawak, which is located in Sarawak.

There has been an increase in the number of students taking Iban in primary school but a decrease of those in secondary school, based on statistics for 2011, 2012 and 2023, as shown in Appendix A. In 2011, there were about 23,000 pupils learning Bahasa Iban in primary schools, and an estimated 32,000 students taking it as an elective subject in secondary schools (Chen, 2011). Out of the 1,261 primary schools in Sarawak, 641 are offering Bahasa Iban as a subject (Chen 2011). An estimate in 2012 placed the number of students taking Iban in primary schools at 48,969 and the number of secondary school students at 22,512 (The Borneo Post, 2012). There were 1,650 teachers teaching the subject in 693 primary schools, and only 291 teachers teaching the subject in 95 secondary schools (The Borneo Post, 2012).

In 2023, the statistics from the state education department show that less than one-third of students who took Iban as a subject in primary school (67,308 students) continued with Iban in secondary school (20,070 students). The number of primary schools offering Iban as a subject has been stable at 693 schools since 2012, but there are now fewer secondary schools offering Iban as a subject (95 schools in 2012 and 83 schools in 2023). There is a good supply of Iban language teachers in primary schools (2,662 teachers) but barely enough in secondary schools (502 teachers). The teacher-to-student ratio at primary schools is 1:25 while the ratio at secondary schools is 1:40.

In 2023, Iban politicians like Wilson Nyabong Ijang and Christopher Gira Sambang called for the Malaysian government to address the acute shortage of Iban teachers (Chua 2023; Tawie 2023). They cited a study which claimed that 2,100 Iban teachers are needed in primary schools and 26 in secondary schools because Iban teachers are retiring. The shortage of Iban teachers being acute inevitably affects the offering of Iban as a subject. However, the statistics from the state education department for the 2023/2024 academic session show that the number of teachers currently teaching in primary and secondary schools has exceeded their estimate. Nevertheless, there may be an issue with quality, as indicated by the total number of teachers with the Iban language option (specialisation). The statistics from the state education department show that in primary schools, there are only 352 of these teachers (or 13.2% of 2,662 Iban language teachers) and in secondary schools, there are 79 (or 15.7% of 502 teachers). Some Iban classes may be taught by Iban native speakers who are not trained in the pedagogy of teaching Iban.

The certification of teachers for teaching Iban is handled by only three institutions of higher learning. At the present time, one university in Malaysia, Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris, has offered a degree programme in the teaching of Iban since 2010 (Sandai & Ong 2015). The first intake involved twenty participants. However, in the teaching degree programme, Iban is offered as a minor subject along with Malay, and this means that few graduates will end up teaching Iban (Lim 2021). Two teacher-training colleges in Sarawak also train Iban teachers. When it first started, the degree programme (Program Pensiswazahan Guru Bahasa Iban) at Institut Perguruan Kampus Rejang had twenty-five participants but has since trained 322 teachers (2013–2021). Another 146 will graduate by 2026, and there are plans to shut down the programme in 2029. The Institut Perguruan Kampus Miri started with an enrolment of thirty participants and has since

trained fifty-seven teachers (2015–2020) but the in-service six-week training programme is no longer offered. The initial enthusiasm for Iban teacher training has since receded into lukewarm support for its continuation.

To assess the vitality of the Iban language, and its potential as a language of wider communication, the Ethnologue Expanded Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (EGIDS) was used in the current study. EGIDS measures the vitality (and conversely the endangerment) of a language on a scale from 0 (International) to 10 (Extinct). For a language to be at Level 1 (National) and Level 2 (Regional), it needs to be used within major government administrative units (Lewis & Simons, 2010). For a language to be ranked Level 3 (Trade communication), it needs to transcend language differences across a region to be used as a common language in contexts such as work and mass media. The language does not need to have the status of an official language but it is usually written. It is difficult for an indigenous language to reach Level 3 because they are usually oral languages spoken by members of the indigenous communities, and seldom by people who are not from the indigenous groups. Level 4 (Educational) describes a language that is in vigorous use, with standardisation and literature being sustained through a widespread system of institutionally supported education.

Iban can be considered an educational language but it is not in vigorous use based on studies on Iban (Ting & Ling 2012). Level 5 (Written) means that a language is in vigorous use if the literature in a standardised form is used by some though is not yet widespread or sustainable. In fact, Ting & Ling (2012) placed the Iban language at Level 5 in their study among Iban teenagers studying in urban and rural schools in various regions of Sarawak. There is some institutional support for written literacy in the Iban language in the form of story books, magazines, and sections in newspapers. However, Iban does not fall into Level 6a (Vigorous) or Level 6b (Threatened) as languages at these levels (till Level 10) are used orally and Iban already has an orthography. For details on other vitality levels, refer to the EGIDS descriptors in Appendix B.

3. Theoretical framework of study

Laitin's (1993) game theory of language regimes is a language-planning framework that explains the motivations behind language choice. The game theory links the micro level of individual language choices to the macro level of the status of languages in a global context like English. The macro level takes into account the national context, such as considering national and official languages, which is Malay for Malaysia. Individual language choices are made in the context of national and global settings. Laitin (1993) states that "a decision to acquire a particular language does not imply a decision to drop another language" (235). This reflects the concept of additive bilingualism (Baker 2011), where individuals learn to speak a number of languages for different communicative purposes in life. For example, in mixed marriages involving individuals from two indigenous groups, the numerical dominance of the groups determines which indigenous language becomes the chosen language for family communication. Ting & Berek (2021) found that only one-third of children from Bidayuh–Malay marriages can speak Bidayuh, while children from Bidayuh–Melanau marriages lose the ability to speak Melanau but retained their ability to speak Bidayuh. This is because of the small Melanau population in Sarawak (4.74%) compared with Bidayuh (7%). Surprisingly, in Bidayuh–Chinese marriages, the children can speak the ethnic languages of both parents. Laitin (1993) states that people have "multiple ethnic heritages" and "complex language repertoires and can communicate quite effectively across a range of apparently diverse cultural zones" (143).

In Laitin's (1993) game theory of language regimes, language choices are rational decisions based on the utility functions of the languages and the economic returns of the language choices. As an example, ethnic languages are valued because they symbolise the ethnic identity of the group. In Malaysia, Malay has different utility values. For students, Malay proficiency enables them to excel in academic subjects as it is the medium of instruction in school. For adults seeking employment, Malay proficiency enables them to enter government service and secure a stable job with a pension upon retirement. From 24 January 2024, the public service recruits would no longer be offered the pension scheme, and they would retire on accumulated Employees Provident Fund savings. In daily life, Malay proficiency facilitates inter-ethnic communication and enables people to build rapport with other ethnic groups. English and Standard Mandarin have utility functions in the economic arena because they are often used as the official language in the private sector.

Laitin's (2000) game theory of language regimes proposes the three-language formula to explain strategic language choice in the community. The 3+1 languages are the global language, two state languages, and the vernacular language,

where the +1 refers to the additional vernacular language. The Malay community in Malaysia probably needs only two languages (3-1) to function. They need English as the global language and Malay, which is their mother tongue and the national and official language. Their mother tongue is a regional Malay dialect. Ting (2010) stated that

For Laitin's framework of game theory and language planning to explain Malaysian language policy outcomes enacted at the micro-level of interpersonal communication, the three-language formula needs to be redefined with the caveat that Bahasa Malaysia and its varieties are considered one language. (407).

On the other hand, indigenous communities need three languages to function in the community (Malay, English, and the indigenous language). Laitin's (1993) game theory of language regimes will be used to discuss the formal use of Iban among the Iban community.

4. Methodology

A descriptive study was conducted on the extent of the Iban community's formal use of the ethnic language in Sarawak, Malaysia.

4.1. Participants

A total of 1,204 Iban respondents participated in the survey. Purposive sampling was conducted whereby respondents were included if they fulfilled the selection criteria; that is, they had at least one parent who was Iban, and they were living in Sarawak at the time of the study. More respondents (63.70%) were from non-Iban dominant areas; for instance, Kuching, Samarahan, Betong, Limbang, Sibuluan, and Sarikei. A smaller percentage (36.30%) were from Iban dominant areas such as Sri Aman, Miri, Saratok, Lubok Antu, and Kapit. Almost equal numbers of female and male respondents participated in the survey; 53.1% female and 46.9% male. The respondents ranged from twenty years old and below to sixty years old and above, with the largest number of participants aged between twenty and twenty-nine years old. For marital status, 40.7% of the respondents were single, while 55.2% and 4.1% of them reported being married or divorced/widowed, respectively. Most of the respondents were Christians (92.5%). Among the respondents, more worked in the government service (43.5%) than in the private sector (25.8%). Over half of the respondents (59.4%) were degree holders.

Table 1. Respondents' demographic characteristics ($N = 1,204$)

Demographic characteristic		Frequency	Percentage
Current town of residency	Non-Iban dominant areas	767	63.70
	Iban dominant areas	437	36.29
Gender	Female	639	53.07
	Male	565	46.92
Age	19 years old and below	67	5.56
	20–29 years old	378	31.40
	30–39 years old	237	19.68
	40–49 years old	275	22.84
	50–59 years old	202	16.78
	60 years old and above	45	3.74
Marital status	Single	490	40.69

	Married	665	55.23
	Divorced/widow/widower	49	4.07
Religion	Christian	1114	92.52
	Muslim	59	4.90
	Other	9	0.75
	Bahai	6	0.50
	Buddhist	5	0.41
	Hindu	1	0.08
	No religion	10	0.83
	Current job	Civil servant	524
Private servant		311	25.83
Homemaker		40	3.32
Retiree		37	3.07
Self-employed		31	2.57
Student		216	17.94
Unemployed		45	3.74
Monthly income	Less than RM2,000	107	8.89
	RM2,000–RM3,999	268	22.26
	RM4,000–RM5,999	192	15.95
	RM6,000–RM7,999	181	15.03
	RM8,000–RM9,999	76	6.31
	RM10,000 and above	84	6.98
	Not working	296	24.58
Highest level of educational qualification	Primary 6	5	0.42
	Form 3	18	1.50
	Form 5	132	10.96
	Form 6	75	6.23
	Certificate	26	2.16
	Diploma	233	19.34
	Degree and higher	715	59.39

4.2. Instrument

An eighty-item questionnaire was prepared in English and Malay based on UNESCO's nine factors for assessing language vitality and endangerment (Brenzinger et al. 2003). Each of the nine factors (except Factor 2: absolute population number of speakers) was evaluated on a scale from 0 (most endangered) to 5 (safest). The nine factors are intergenera-

tional language transmission (Factor 1); the absolute number of speakers (Factor 2); the proportion of speakers within the total population (Factor 3); shifts in domains of language use (Factor 4); response to new domains and media (Factor 5); availability of materials for language education and literacy (Factor 6); governmental and institutional language attitudes and policies (Factor 7); community members' attitudes towards their own language (Factor 8); and the type and quality of documentation (Factor 9). Factors 1-6 are vitality factors, while Factors 7-8 are attitudinal factors and Factor 9 is the documentation factor.

However, for the purpose of this paper, results for only three factors are reported, that is, the means for learning Iban (Factor 1), the availability of materials for language education and literacy in Iban (Factor 6), and frequency of formal use of Iban (Factor 7). The Cronbach's alpha value was .722, showing acceptable internal consistency (more than the cut-off value of $\alpha = .700$) (Igbaria et al., 1994). Results are also reported for the level of language skills in Iban.

4.3 Data collection and analysis

The questionnaire data were collected using an online Google questionnaire. The link was sent to potential respondents by the first researcher through phone contacts, emails, and WhatsApp messages. The participants were informed of the purpose of the study, voluntary participation, and the confidentiality of their responses. The respondents' consent was obtained before they responded to the questionnaire. The data were then analysed and reported using frequencies and percentages.

5. Results and discussion

5.1 Means for learning Iban

The results show that Iban is mostly learnt informally rather than formally. Table 2 shows that a majority of the respondents (91.20% of 1,204) spoke Iban as their first language when they were children. Far more respondents learnt Iban informally than formally. In total, 94.60% of the respondents first learned Iban from their parents, showing strong inter-generational language transmission in the Iban community. Moreover, over half (53.90%) of the respondents had taken Iban in school, ranging from Primary 6 to the degree level. In addition, 46.76% of the respondents have no children and 53.24% (or 641) have children. Out of the 641 respondents who have children, 66.61% respondents report that their children did not learn Iban in school and only 33.39% have enrolled their children for formal Iban education. Based on the results, it seems that the percentage of Iban people learning Iban formally in school is declining. This is because 53.90% of the respondents themselves have taken the Iban subject in school but only 33.39% of their children are doing so. If this pattern continues, it will be difficult for Iban to reach EGIDS Level 4 (Educational) because the Iban people themselves would not have the written literacy levels that are needed to use Iban in formal communication.

Table 2. Respondents' acquisition of the Iban language ($N = 1,204$)

Acquisition of the Iban language	Frequency	Percentage	
Language first spoken as a child	Bidayuh	13	1.07
	Chinese dialect	5	0.41
	English	43	3.57
	Iban	1098	91.20
	Local Malay	28	2.32
	Mandarin	3	0.25
	Melanau	1	0.08
	Other	6	0.50
	Standard Malay	7	0.58
How did you first learn Iban?	From my parents	1139	94.60
	From my brothers and sisters	0	0.00
	From my grandparents	36	2.99
	From my relatives	8	0.66
	From my school	16	1.33
	From social media	2	0.17
	From radio	2	0.17
Other	1	0.08	
Did you learn Iban in school? If yes, what is the highest level?	Did not learn Iban in school	555	46.10
	Primary 6	167	13.87
	Form 3	276	22.92
	Form 5	155	12.87
	Form 6	0	0.00
	Certificate	6	0.50
	Diploma	10	0.83
Degree and higher	35	2.90	

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
	Primary 6	100	8.30
	Form 3	52	4.33
	Form 5	51	4.23
	Form 6	2	0.17
	Certificate	1	0.08
	Diploma	0	0.00
	Degree and higher	8	0.66

The Iban language is offered as a Pupil's Own Language in Sarawak's government schools, but not many of the respondents enrolled their children for the Iban subject in schools. Since Iban is offered as an elective module, it is not compulsory for students to learn it in school (Coluzzi 2016; Barghi et al. 2017). There seems to be a lack of interest to learn the indigenous language in a formal setting, which is probably due to the lower instrumental or economic value of Iban. The declining interest in the formal learning of Iban should not be surprising. Many speech communities are shifting away from their mother tongue as they see no economic value in their native languages (David et al. 2009).

The economic return of language choices is a key factor in Laitin's (1993) game theory of language regimes. 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. Furthermore, Iban students are made to feel that their language is primarily for use at home and in informal settings. They are discouraged from speaking their indigenous language within the school compound due to the enforcement of Malay and English as the official languages in school. In the 1970s and 1980s, fines were imposed on students who spoke languages other than the standard languages (Malay, English, and Mandarin) in school. Given such circumstances, Iban students chose not to speak Iban, and opted for languages permitted by the school to avoid getting into trouble. The penalties may also make them feel that the Iban language is sub-standard.

5.2 Language skills in Iban

Data were obtained on respondents' listening, speaking, reading and writing skills in Iban to find out their self-reported skill level. The Iban respondents report a good command of their indigenous language but they have a better mastery of oral skills than written skills, as is expected. Table 3 shows that 93.51% of the respondents can speak Iban fluently, while 96.26% of them can easily follow conversations in Iban. Although 46.10% of the respondents did not learn the Iban language in school, they rate themselves as having mastery of the indigenous language. They acquired the language informally at home from talking with their grandparents and parents, which indicates intergenerational language transmission. However, the informal learning of Iban means that these speakers are only able to use it for oral communication.

As for written literacy in Iban, a majority of the respondents (88.54%) also claim that they can easily understand the contents of books, newspapers, articles, and magazines in Iban. A substantial percentage (82.23%), although lower than the other three skills, report that they can easily write anything in Iban. This percentage is far higher than the 53.90% who have taken Iban as a subject in school. Iban people can understand printed materials in Iban if they read aloud the sentences. By the same token, they can write in Iban based on how they speak. The spelling may not be uniform but it can be understood, with some guesswork. The results revealed that about 11% cannot read written materials in Iban and about 18% cannot write in Iban. These results suggest that literacy is limited in the Iban community. Correspondingly, it is worth noting that its prevalence among non-Iban people is even more unlikely. With 11%–18% of the Iban respondents who do not have literacy in Iban, this can pose a barrier for the language to gain traction as the language

for formal communication.

Table 3. Respondents' language skills in Iban (N = 1,204)

Item		Frequency	Percentage
I can speak fluently in Iban.	Strongly disagree	14	1.16
	Disagree	21	1.74
	Unsure	43	3.71
	Agree	359	29.81
	Strongly agree	767	63.70
I can easily follow a conversation in Iban.	Strongly disagree	14	1.16
	Disagree	14	1.16
	Unsure	17	1.41
	Agree	304	25.25
	Strongly agree	855	71.01
I can easily understand the contents of books, newspapers, articles, and magazines in Iban.	Strongly disagree	17	1.41
	Disagree	32	2.66
	Unsure	89	7.39
	Agree	465	38.62
	Strongly agree	601	49.92
I can easily write anything in Iban.	Strongly disagree	24	1.99
	Disagree	50	4.15
	Unsure	140	11.63
	Agree	473	39.29
	Strongly agree	517	42.94

5.3 Possession of materials for language education and literacy in Iban

The results in this section show that 40.03–50.99% of Iban respondents own Iban-language materials such as dictionaries, study materials, magazines, and storybooks but it cannot be assumed that they are frequently reading them. As shown in Table 3, over 70% of the Iban respondents claim that they read printed materials in Iban. Of this, 39.04% give the Bible as the most read material. Demographic information shows that 92.50% of the respondents identify as Christians. These statistics suggest that Christian respondents may frequently read the Bible in Iban. However, it is possible that these same respondents also own English and Malay Bibles, which are likely to be read as often as, if not more than, the Iban Bible, because Christian Ibans tend to go to churches that conduct services in either English or Malay. The situation in Iban-dominant towns such as Song is different because Ting et al. (2021) found that 94.5% of the 200 Iban respondents reported using Iban as the main language in the religion domain. In the present study, the Iban respondents were from all over Sarawak where hardly any churches conduct services in Iban given the larger cosmopolitan population.

Table 4. Availability of printed materials in Iban at home (N = 1,204)

Item	Copies	Frequency	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
	Storybooks	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 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 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

Besides the Bible, Table 4 shows that almost half of the Iban respondents own other written materials in Iban. A total of 40.03% of the respondents own Iban dictionaries at home. About the same percentage of respondents have Iban textbooks and grammar books (43.53%) as well as Iban magazines (43.44%). Some of the written materials, such as dictionaries and grammar books could have been bought when they were learning Iban in school. They likely no longer refer to these materials once their formal learning of Iban ends. One probable way to expand literacy in Iban is through fiction because half of the respondents (50.99%) keep Iban story books at home.

The percentages of Iban respondents owning various written materials in Iban extend at most to about half of the group studied, and this is not high. This can be attributed to a lack of interest in owning education and literacy materials in Iban as the language is merely a means of oral communication to the Iban community. However, it is possible that there is a lack of variety in Iban written materials, which are insufficient to whet the appetites of the Iban people to read in their indigenous language. According to Embas (2017), the Iban community has made insufficient efforts to develop the language through reading resources. Despite years of active publication by numerous public and private media organisations, especially the Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka (DBP), Tun Jugah Foundation, Dayak Cultural Foundation, and Dayak Bidayuh National Association, there has not been a single journal published on a regular basis in the Iban language. This indicates that Iban does not yet function as an academic language. Nonetheless, there are some magazines in Iban that are privately owned and published, for example, *Pegari*, *Kenarau*, and *Bangka*. Figure 1 shows the *Kenarau* magazine being promoted on Facebook. To date, only the *Pegari* magazine is published regularly and has been since 2002 (Figure 2). However, its readership may consist mainly of young Iban people and those who are interested in learning Iban culture and traditions.

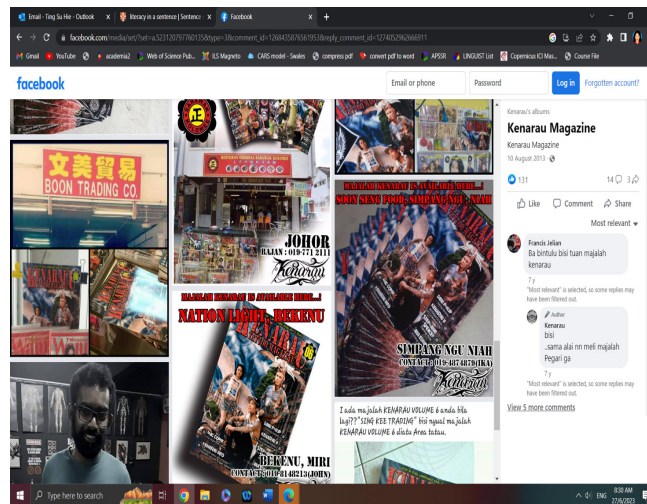


Figure 1: The *Kenarau* magazine being promoted on Facebook. The text underneath the image on the lefthand side is translated to say, I have the *Kenarau* magazine Volume 6. You, when? Sing Kee Trading sells *Kenarau* magazine volume 6 in Tatau area¹

¹ Source: *Kenarau Magazine*. 2013. *Majalah Kenarau* is available here...! Soon seng food, Simping Ngu, Niah [Uploaded image]. Facebook, August 10. (https://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=a.523120797760135&type=3&comment_id=1268435876561953&reply_comment_id=1274052962666911) (Accessed 2024-03-23.)



Figure 2: A cover of the Pegari magazine²

Next, the results show that about half of the Iban respondents have some audio-visual materials in Iban (Table 5). Altogether, 53.07% of the respondents keep audio recordings in Iban at home, while 55.56% of the respondents have video recordings in Iban at home. Iban songs in the form of CDs are available at local music stores, but in recent years, the Iban community has turned to YouTube music videos as a source of entertainment. As for movies, the first Iban film was produced by Robin Lai only in December 2019. Titled *Bunga Ngerembai* (Blooming Flower), it was released in Malaysia and China in June 2020 to coincide with Gawai Dayak, the Iban harvest festival. In the year 2021, an Iban film titled *Belaban Hidup: Infeksi Zombie* (Fight for Life: Zombie Infection) directed by Ray Lee won the Best Film and Best Horror Film at the International Symbolic Art Film Festival held in St Petersburg, Russia (Bernama 2021). The limited audio-visual materials in Iban may explain why few respondents have these items, and the lack of variety also means that the audio-visual materials in Iban cater to a niche audience.

² Source: Pegari Production. 2018. Majalah Pegari Vol. 63 dipelabaka deka keluar ujung bulan March 2018 tu ila. Sapa bisi artikel pasal adat, main asal, berita artis, pemansang, peransang, jerita tuai, jerpan, pengerawang ati etb tau anjung ngagai kami. Berita ke silik tau tanya ba nombor 0194359000 [Uploaded image]. Facebook, February 18. (<https://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=a.229135417157022.50267.190438724360025&type=3>) (Accessed 2024-03-23.)

Table 5. Availability of Iban audio-visual materials at home (N = 1,204)

Item	Copies	Frequency	Percentage
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

Table 6 shows results on the respondents' awareness of mass media programmes in Iban. A portion of the respondents are unsure whether there are Iban radio programmes or television news throughout the week (9.55% and 21.18% respectively), indicating that they do not tune in at all. However, a majority of the respondents (86.55%) agree that there are radio programmes in Iban. These are broadcast over Radio Television Malaysia (RTM) through 101.3FM, WaiFM Station and CAT's Radio. These are among the most popular online radio stations in Malaysia, with twenty-four-hour live streaming on their online radio programmes. These private radio stations broadcast daily news in Iban on their network, serving as avenues for promoting Iban language use. Ting & Felix (2023) stated that Wai FM Iban is broadcasted for eighteen hours daily and consists of the following six segments:

1. Pengerak Pagi, also known as DuoPagiWAI (6am – 9am on weekdays),
2. Wai 9-12 (9am – 12pm),
3. Ngela Tengahari (12pm – 3pm),
4. Rentak Ngalihari (3pm – 6pm),
5. Sada Lemai (6pm – 9pm), and
6. Pemerindang Malam (9pm – 12am)

Each segment may consist of up to three programmes such as those for Iban song lovers and talks on contemporary issues.

As for television news in Iban, 67.78% of the respondents agree that the programmes are available throughout the week. As of 2020, Sarawak has a new television channel, Television Sarawak (TVS), that broadcasts news in Iban twice daily at 11 a.m. and 7 p.m. Iban programmes on radio and television channels develop oral skills in Iban and consuming the news items could at least increase exposure to vocabulary on less familiar matters. The Iban section in *Utusan Borneo* newspaper also plays a role in developing oral skills (<https://www.utusanborneo.com.my/iban>). Otherwise, most people using and acquiring Iban would use frequent, everyday words on concrete subject matters.

Table 6. Awareness of mass media programmes in Iban (N = 1,204)

Item		Frequency	Percentage
I think radio programmes in Iban are available throughout the week.	Strongly disagree	14	1.16
	Disagree	33	2.74
	Unsure	115	9.55
	Agree	532	44.19
	Strongly agree	510	42.36
I think television news in Iban are available throughout the week.	Strongly disagree	46	3.82
	Disagree	87	7.22
	Unsure	255	21.18
	Agree	464	38.54
	Strongly agree	352	29.24

5.4 Frequency of formal use of Iban

The results in Table 7 show infrequent use of Iban as a formal language in school and work communication. Only 28.65% of the respondents attended kindergartens using Iban as the medium of instruction. A majority of the Iban respondents attended preschools that used English or Malay as the instructional language. When entering primary school, the majority of respondents took Iban as an elective subject (53.90%). At best, this is the proportion of Iban speakers who can use Iban for formal communication, whether in the education or employment domain. As a vernacular language in Sarawak, Iban has limited functions in the school setting, where it is used mostly for informal social interaction. Metom et al. (2021) reported that more Iban respondents in Iban-dominant areas (41.7%) speak Iban with classmates than those in non-Iban-dominant areas (20%).

Table 7. Frequency of formal use of Iban (N = 1,204)

Item		Frequency	Percentage
My teacher spoke Iban in kindergarten.	Strongly disagree	219	18.19
	Disagree	317	26.33
	Unsure	323	26.83
	Agree	250	20.76
	Strongly agree	95	7.89
I think Iban is often used in school meetings.	Strongly disagree	165	13.70
	Disagree	379	31.48
	Unsure	377	31.31
	Agree	212	17.61
	Strongly agree	71	5.90

I think there are enough Iban teachers for teaching the Iban subject in schools.	Strongly disagree	309	25.66
	Disagree	336	27.91
	Unsure	301	25.00
	Agree	155	12.87
	Strongly agree	103	8.55
I think Iban community groups promote the written use of the Iban language.	Strongly disagree	32	2.66
	Disagree	88	7.31
	Unsure	262	21.76
	Agree	478	39.70
	Strongly agree	344	28.57

Altogether 21.42% of the respondents agree that there are enough teachers for teaching the Iban subject in schools. This indicates that a majority of respondents are aware of the acute shortage of Iban language teachers. This shortage will affect efforts to improve the Iban language proficiency among the younger generation of Sarawak (Muyang 2019). Iban people can train to become teachers of Iban in Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris and two teachers' institutes in Sarawak. However, the strong promotion of Malay and English in Malaysia's language policy contributes to the lack of qualified Iban language teachers in schools (Omar & Teoh 1994; David et al. 2009). Furthermore, the situation has been exacerbated as Institut Perguruan Kampus Miri had already closed the Iban language programme, and Institut Perguruan Kampus Rejang will close the programme after the last cohort graduates in 2026. The perceived demand for Iban language teachers may be low, leading to fewer students enrolling for Iban teacher training programmes. It leads back to perceptions of the lower utility value of Iban, compared with Malay. The widespread use of Sarawak Malay and pedagogical challenges in motivating students to learn the Iban language contribute to the decline of Iban in Sarawak (Umbat 2020). Furthermore, being a low status language, Iban is mainly spoken among family members at home, indicating its limited functions as compared to Malay and English, which are economically and politically powerful languages (McLellan 2014).

Interestingly, a majority of the respondents (68.27%) report that Iban community groups promote the written use of the Iban language. While these efforts to promote written Iban may be in place, the Iban community's uptake may not be as desired. Only 23.51% of the respondents have had the experience of attending meetings conducted in Iban. Examples of such meetings are the Dayak Bidayuh National Association meetings, where the Iban language can be used as it would be understood among the Iban community. Based on the data, Iban is hardly used in school meetings because of the presence of other ethnic groups who may not understand or speak Iban. School meetings are often conducted in Malay or English since they are the official languages that serve as languages for wider communication among Malaysians.

5.5 Discussion

The discussion is centred on the potential for Iban to develop into a language of wider communication. On the EGIDS scale of language vitality Iban is already on Level 5 as a written language, and it is used orally by all generations, and is effectively used in written form in some parts of the community (Ting & Ling 2012). In fact, as an indigenous language, Iban has fared well because it is actually an educational language, and literacy in the language is being transmitted through the public education system, albeit as an elective subject. Because of this, Iban has reached Level 4 (Educational), similar to Kadazandusun in Sabah. Other indigenous languages in Malaysia such as Bidayuh advanced as far as having a standardised orthography for the limited purpose of producing textbooks for preschool education. However, the Bidayuh spelling is not uniformly used even by teachers in the mother tongue education preschool programme (Kayad et al. 2022), and is not disseminated through formal means to the Bidayuh community. The next level for the Iban lan-

guage is to become a trade language (Level 3) but the findings of the present study indicate that it is difficult for Iban to assume the role of a language of wider communication that is used for local and regional work by both Iban and non-Iban people.

The utility of Iban as a shared language for inter-ethnic communication is low. It is difficult to envision the use of Iban in formal contexts that involve other ethnic groups because using a language that is not understood by others is divisive. People who cannot speak Iban would feel alienated and this does not augur well for ethnic harmony. Normative language choices in Malaysia tend towards accommodation, taking into consideration the ethnicity and language background of the interactants (Dumanig et al. 2013). Therefore, based on the three-language formula in Laitin's (1993) game theory of language regimes, the rational choice is not to use Iban for formal communication in mixed-ethnic situations.

Iban has a greater likelihood of growth in Iban-dominant contexts, such as in cultural associations (e.g., Tun Jugah Foundation) and in political parties (e.g., Parti Bansa Dayak Sarawak). Parti Bansa Dayak Sarawak, an offshoot of the Sarawak National Party, has a history of supporting aspiring Iban politicians, especially during Sarawak's independence movement and Malaysia's formation in the 1960s. Iban has a good chance to grow in status when Iban politicians use it in campaign speeches and events to build rapport with the constituency. This is because the Iban community has great respect for their politicians. As for private companies such as publishers of Iban magazines and newspapers, the employees are mostly Iban. In such contexts, it is appropriate for Iban to be used to conduct meetings and talks, and indirectly strengthen their shared Iban identity. However, for convenience Iban is usually not used in spoken form because the accompanying written documents are prepared in either Malay or English. This situation brings to light the importance of developing Iban literacy in the Iban community so that the written use of the language can pave the way for Iban to be used for formal communication purposes.

However, the Iban community would not be able to achieve much if they only rely on the language promotion efforts of NGOs and individuals. The findings suggest low confidence for Iban to serve formal communication functions not because of proficiency issues but due to lack of official status. If a government policy were to require all Iban students to study the language in school, this would give prestige to the language. What the indigenous language needs is increased status. According to Crystal (2002), an effective way to revitalise languages is to increase the legitimate power of the minority group in the eyes of the dominant community by increasing the language's prestige and language group's wealth. At the present time, Iban suffers from lack of prestige, by virtue of being an indigenous language vis-à-vis powerful languages such as Malay (national language) and English (international language). It is not enough for the indigenous language to be valued as a symbol of identity and culture.

A government policy requiring the study of Mother Tongue Language would give the needed boost to the vitality of indigenous languages, but there are considerations that make the policy not feasible. In Singapore, Chinese students must take Chinese as a subject and Malay students must take Malay as a subject. Mother Tongue Language is a compulsory subject in primary school and is offered as a second language (Government of Singapore 2023). Undoubtedly, a similar policy in Malaysia would raise Iban's prestige, which could encourage Iban people to change language practices in Iban-dominant contexts so that they would consider using Iban rather than English or Standard Malay for formal communication interactions. However, it is not easy for the Malaysian government to make it compulsory for students to take Iban as a subject in school because it is an indigenous language. Most other indigenous languages, such as Kelabit and Kayan, do not even have a standard orthography and are not taught in school. Making Iban a compulsory subject will raise questions on whether the rule should apply to other indigenous languages. Furthermore, making Iban compulsory will drastically increase the number of students to the extent that there may be a teacher shortage. In Sabah, the issue of whether to make the Kadazandusun language compulsory also brought to light the lack of personnel to teach the language (Ralon 2010). A Sabah politician, Christina Liew, objected to the suggestion to make *Khat*, or Arabic calligraphy, compulsory on the grounds that the syllabus is already heavy (Chan 2019). Going by the present political circumstances, English and Standard Malay will likely remain as the only compulsory languages in the education system in Malaysia. Going by Laitin's (1993) three-language formula, these two languages are necessary for Malaysians, and parents do not want their children to be burdened with more compulsory language subjects. Hence, it remains a personal choice to study the Iban language in school or university.

6. Conclusion

The study revealed that the formal use of Iban is minimal in Sarawak. In the context of indigenous language preservation and promotion, having an orthography and teaching of the language in school are usually seen as milestones in maintaining the vitality of the language. The study shows that although Iban is an educational language and there is widespread literacy in the Iban community, it remains largely a language for informal communication. The Iban language cannot make inroads into formal contexts of use such as meetings and events and it is hardly used for writing minutes of meetings and reports. The issue is not literacy in Iban because a majority of the Iban respondents can read and write in Iban, and almost all of them can understand and speak it. Over half of the respondents studied Iban as a school subject. Even if they do not have formal education in Iban, they can still read and write Iban based on the sounds of the language. It can be argued that literacy in Iban is not well-supported due to the lack of documentation and resource materials. This line of argument revolves around the individuals, particularly their mastery of the language. A more holistic perspective is to look at the societal context which poses barriers for the formal use of Iban. The Iban may be the largest ethnic group in Sarawak but they live and work among people of different ethnic groups. This makes a shared language of communication the priority.

Our study has contributed to the field by revealing the limited written use of Iban. Previous studies have over-represented the use of Iban in education and employment domains (e.g., Mis 2011) by focussing on informal interactions. The present study shows that at most, the vitality of Iban is at EGIDS Level 4 (educational), as a language experiencing vigorous use, with standardisation and literature being sustained through a widespread system of institutionally supported education. Given that only one-quarter of the Iban respondents has experienced using Iban for formal use and written use, it is difficult to envision Iban as a language of wider communication across ethnic groups (EGIDS Level 3). Having said that, Iban is a language of wider communication in rural areas like Belaga where small indigenous groups like the Kejaman and Punan can speak Iban and use it in the market and other places where people of different ethnic groups gather. In the context of Laitin's (1993) game theory of language regimes, speech communities speaking vernacular languages need more languages to function in the community. Hence, since Iban is a vernacular language, it is expected that the Iban people need three languages, namely, English (global language), Malay (sole national and official language), and Iban to communicate within the Iban community.

A limitation of this study is the reliance on self-reports. Further research on actual language use, particularly in formal situations involving Iban-dominant organisations, would verify the findings in this paper. Additionally, future investigations should continue to localise their research to geographical areas with an Iban population, whether that is small or large. Such studies will provide useful insights for language promotion by delving into the possible mechanisms of how a strong indigenous language can function as a language for formal communication purposes.

Appendix A. Statistics on number of Iban students and teachers

Level	Statistics	2011	2012	2023
Primary School	Total number of schools	641	693	693
	Total number of classes	–	–	5,139
	Total number of students	23,000	48,967	67,308
	Total number of teachers	–	1,650	2,662
	Total number of teachers with the Iban language option	–	–	352
Secondary School	Total number of schools	–	95	83
	Total number of classes	–	–	1,320
	Total number of students	32,000	22,512	20,070
	Total number of teachers	–	291	502
	Total number of teachers with the Iban language option	–	–	79

Note: Complete data are not available for 2011 and 2012. The 2023 data are obtained via personal communication from Jabatan Pendidikan Negeri Sarawak (Sektor Pembelajaran, 22 November 2023).

Appendix B. EGIDS by Lewis and Simons (2010)

Level	Label	Description
0	International	The language is used internationally for a broad range of functions.
1	National	The language is used in education, work, mass media, government at the nationwide level.
2	Regional	The language is used for local and regional mass media and governmental services.
3	Trade	The language is used for local and regional work by both insiders and outsiders.
4	Educational	Literacy in the language is being transmitted through a system of public education.
5	Written	The language is used orally by all generations and is effectively used in written form in parts of the community.
6a	Vigorous	The language is used orally by all generations and is being learned by children as their first language.
6b	Threatened	The language is used orally by all generations but only some of the child-bearing generation are transmitting it to their children.
7	Shifting	The child-bearing generation knows the language well enough to use it among themselves but none are transmitting it to their children.
8a	Moribund	The only remaining active speakers of the language are members of the grandparent generation.
8b	Nearly extinct	The only remaining speakers of the language are members of the grandparent generation or older who have little opportunity to use the language.
9	Dormant	The language serves as a reminder of heritage identity for an ethnic community. No one has more than symbolic proficiency.
10	Extinct	No one retains a sense of ethnic identity associated with the language, even for symbolic purposes.

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