

LANGUAGE VITALITY REASSESSMENT AND REVIVAL EFFORTS FOR BIDAYUH OF SARAWAK, MALAYSIA

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Abstract

The Bidayuh language has been characterized as having stable vitality in some studies and shifting status in others. An Ethnologue update labels two Bidayuh dialects as endangered, but little is known about language use in the Bidayuh community and the community members' awareness of their language's vitality. This study reassesses the vitality of the Bidayuh language of Sarawak, Malaysia, based on survey responses from 467 Bidayuh respondents. The study confirms that Bidayuh is threatened, as most of the children no longer speak the language. The respondents in the survey are aware of the vulnerable status of Bidayuh and believe that parents should speak Bidayuh to their children to keep the language strong. The findings suggest that cultural immersion may be the key to making the Bidayuh language an inherent part of the life of younger Bidayuh people.

Keywords: language vitality, EGIDS, intergenerational transmission, language revival
ISO 639-3 codes: *bth*, *sne*, *trx*

1 Introduction

Language shift occurs when “a community of users replaces one language by another”, as opposed to language maintenance or “the continuing use of a language” when members of a community see their language as threatened by a decrease in usage and as under threat of loss (Grenoble & Osipov 2021). An established scale used to measure and compare language shift across settings is the Expanded Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (EGIDS) by Simons and Lewis (2010). According to EGIDS, small groups usually have a vitality status of Level 6a (Vigorous) or lower. The vitality status can vary among locations for the same language. An EGIDS assessment can be made for a whole language community, as well as for a smaller speech community within that language community, such as a village. An example is the Lawa language, which is at Levels 6a, 6b, 8a and 8b, depending on the location of the village in Chiang Mai and Mae Hong Son provinces, where there is a shift towards Northern Thai and Central Thai languages (Panyawuthakrai & Thawornpat 2022:65). In locations where locals see their language as important and use it widely, the vitality status is stronger. For example, Northern Catanduanes, spoken in Caramoran of the Philippines, is at Level 5 (Developing) (Bautista 2025:124). On the other hand, linguistic insecurity and a sense of embarrassment in speaking the ethnic language compared to the national language can hamper intergenerational transmission. In the case of Achehense in Blang Punteut and Jambo Timu suburbs of Lhokseumawe in Acheh, Indonesia, only some mothers ensured that their children could speak the language (Idaryani 2022). These studies on language shift and vitality show that each minority language under threat of language shift is a potent area of research as the macro- and micro-factors may be different, giving rise to different viable language revival strategies.

It may seem that research on the sustainability of Bidayuh language use is unnecessary because of past studies (Coluzzi et al. 2013; Hanawalt et al. 2015; Ting & Ling 2013; Ting et al. 2025) and the updated Ethnologue status reports. However, the Ethnologue has several methods of collecting language data that rely on reports from linguists as well as interviews with community members who provide in-depth descriptions of languages, language groups, attitudes and language use, and multilingual situations. There are no recent findings from community-wide surveys to provide breadth of descriptions of the Bidayuh language use. In

addition, considering the vulnerable vitality status of Bidayuh, it is crucial to investigate whether community members are aware of the situation to do their part in reversing the decline in the use of Bidayuh.

The mutual unintelligibility of Bidayuh dialects, as many as 25 dialects (Rensch 2006:1), presents particular challenges to sustaining the vitality of the language. The extensive regional variations and the concentration of the small Bidayuh population in the Kuching hinterland make it difficult for other ethnic groups to learn Bidayuh because of the absence of large groups of Bidayuh people speaking a common Bidayuh language. Bidayuh couples who come from different Bidayuh dialect groups often resort to using another language to communicate with each other and their children. The combined impact of such personal language choice decisions affects intergenerational transmission and wider usage of the language in Sarawak, Malaysia, which has led to language shift. A decade ago, Bidayuh was a “Vigorous” language (Level 6a) based on EGIDS assessment (Hanawalt et al., 2015; Ting & Ling, 2013:13), but Ting et al.’s (2025:374) study shows that 54% of Bidayuh individuals less than 20 years old do not usually speak Bidayuh for daily communication, and they speak other languages such as Standard Malay, the Sarawak Malay dialect, and English. There is a need to build on previous studies that used demographic or attitudinal data by applying the Sustainable Use Model (Lewis & Simons, 2010) and EGIDS to provide a more solid basis for vitality assessment of Bidayuh.

Our study reassessed the vitality of the Bidayuh language of Sarawak, Malaysia based on data on Bidayuh respondents’ language background, language ability, perceived value of Bidayuh, perceived status as language of wider communication, intergenerational transmission and revival of the language. This is discussed in subsequent sections.

2 Background on Bidayuh of Sarawak

The Bidayuh living in the Sarawak state in Malaysia is an indigenous group of 208,000 members, 8% of the Sarawak state population of 2.5 million. The Bidayuh population is small compared to that of the Iban (28.9%), Malay (22.3%) and Chinese (25.3%) (Department of Statistics Malaysia, cited in Dayak Today, 2025). The Orang Ulu exists in even smaller numbers, and encompasses the Kayan, Kenyah, Kedayan, Lun Bawang, Penan, Bisaya, Kelabit and Kajang living in northern Sarawak. Figure 1 shows a linguistic map of Sarawak and Sabah (Mutturzikin, 2007). This is the latest available linguistic map. The Bidayuh population at the western tip of Sarawak (Jagoi, Tringgus, Biatah, Bukar-Sadong) mirrors the clusters shown in Figure 2.

Figure 1: Linguistic map of Sarawak and Sabah Mutturzikin.com © 2007)

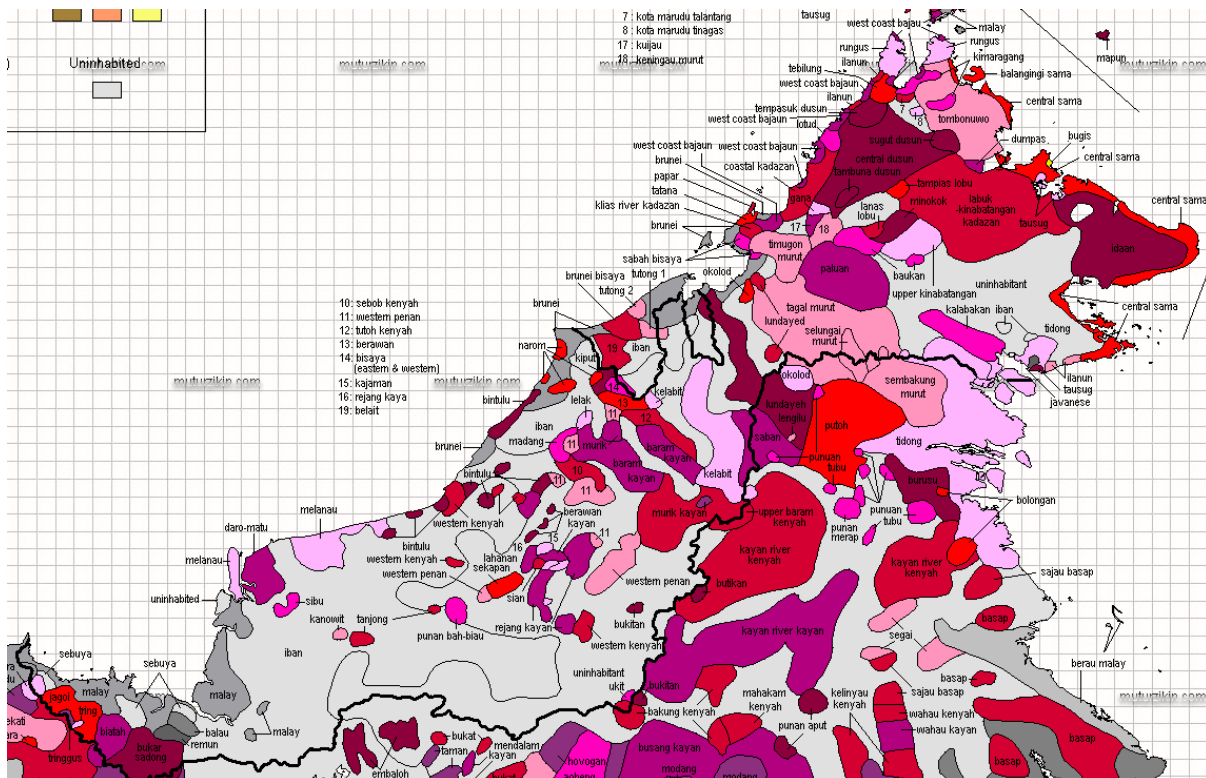


Figure 2: Location of Bidayuh dialect clusters (Rensch 2006).

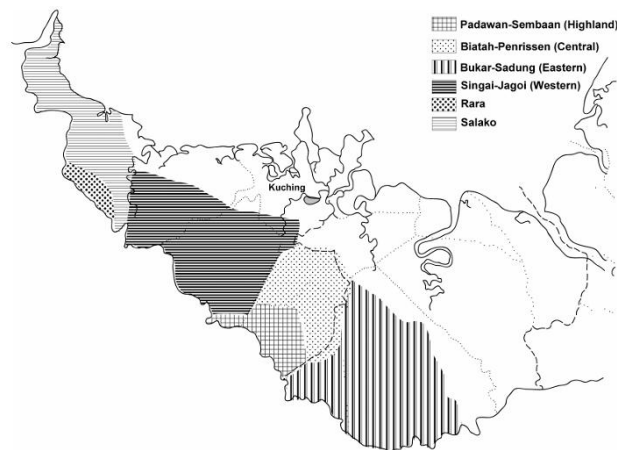


Figure 2 shows Rensch et al.'s (2006:2) classification of Bidayuh dialects with four clusters:

- 1) Bukar-Sadung (Eastern or Serian district), commonly referred to as Bukar-Sadong [ISO 639-3 code: sdo]
- 2) Biatah-Penrissen (Central), commonly referred to as Biatah [ISO 639-3 code: bth]
- 3) Padawan-Sembaan (Highland), commonly referred to as Padawan-Sembaan [ISO 639-3 code: trx]
- 4) Singgai-Jagoi (Western, or Bau district), commonly referred to as Bau-Jagoi [ISO 639-3 code: sne]

Rensch et al.'s (2006:2) terms are based on location and cultural traits, not genetic affiliation. Rensch et al.'s (2006) classification does not follow the ISO classification, which assigns ISO codes to all four of these varieties, thus recognizing them as separate languages. This paper uses the names commonly used by the Bidayuh speakers, a practice also adopted by several researchers because it facilitates clearer communication of findings. Moreover, in their questionnaires and interviews, researchers use community-given names for Bidayuh dialects, which is why their findings are often reported using these rather than linguistic classifications. The Biatah dialect, for instance, is primarily spoken in the lower-altitude central region encompassing Padawan and parts of Kuching (Nais 1988). The Bukar-Sadong dialect is associated with the Serian district and nearby villages. It is also known locally as "Sanda Bidayuh" and features a distinct lexicon and pronunciation from other Bidayuh dialects (Juleng, 2012). Meanwhile, the Bidayuh Singai dialect (part of the Bau-Jagoi dialect cluster) is spoken in Singai and surrounding communities along the Kuching-Bau-Lundu corridor and is sometimes referred to as Jagoi or Bau-Jagoi (Nissom, 2013).

Thus far, bilingual Bidayuh-English and Bidayuh-Malay dictionaries have been produced and for four Bidayuh clusters as follows:

- 1) A Dayak Bidayuh Dictionary: Bau/Jagoi/Singai (Nissom 2013)
- 2) A Biatah-English Dictionary: Biatah (Nais 1988)
- 3) A Sanda Bidayuh (Bukar-Sadong) Dictionary: Bukar-Sadong (Juleng 2012)
- 4) A Borneo Dictionary: A word list with translations in English and Malay (<https://borneodictionary.com/bidayuh-bau/>)
- 5) A Dayak Bidayuh dictionary: Bau, Jagoi, Singgai dialects (<http://thebidayuh.com/>)
- 6) A Malay-Bau Bidayuh dictionary: Bau (<https://glosbe.com/ms/sne>)

Due to the variation across Bidayuh dialects, efforts to standardize the Bidayuh language have been challenging. There is little consensus among the different Bidayuh groups on which dialect should serve as the standard, creating obstacles to developing a unified written form. As a result, even preschool and kindergarten teaching materials must be tailored to the local dialect of an area where educational institutions are located (Kayad et al. 2022a:102). In their study on mother tongue-based education, Kayad et al. (2022a:103) found that both parents and teachers supported the use of the Bidayuh language in early education, but they also acknowledged the difficulty of implementation due to the lack of a standardized dialect and limited educational resources. These challenges contribute to the continued reliance on more dominant languages such as Malay and English in formal education, despite community support for preserving the Bidayuh language. Due to the variability of the Bidayuh dialects, it is not possible to say which dialect they would use in social media posts.

Bidayuh people are more likely to use widely used languages such as Malay (either Standard Malay or Sarawak Malay dialect) and English.

Lexicostatistical analysis shows low lexical similarity among the various Bidayuh isolects, which makes it difficult to develop a common writing system (Joyik et al., 2010). There are no studies directly comparing the mutual intelligibility of the Bidayuh dialects. Based on his personal observation, Misieng (2017:16) found that the Bau-Jagoi dialect and the Singgai dialect have rather high mutual intelligibility, but Bukar-Sadong is different. Misieng (2017) uses the terms commonly used by the Bidayuh community. The similarity of Bau-Jagoi and Singgai dialects may be why Rensch (2006) grouped them together as a Singgai-Jagoi cluster.

Available circumstantial evidence is also included to provide some quantitative comparisons on intelligibility of Bidayuh dialects. Mohamed and Abdul Wahab's (2004:479) study compared the linguistic relationship between Malay and various Bidayuh dialects. By treating Malay as a common reference point, some idea of the differences among Bidayuh dialect were obtained. Their study showed that Salako-Lara, spoken in Lundu, exhibits the highest lexical similarity with Malay at 78.4%, whereas Bukar-Sadong (43.8%), Biatah (45.3%), and Bau-Jagoi (47.9%) show less than 50% similarity. Salako-Lara is classified within the Malayic Dayak subgroup (alongside Iban, Kendayan, and Malay), while the remaining Bidayuh dialects fall under the Land Dayak subgroup of the Austronesian language family. There are no existing intelligibility scores for Bidayuh dialects to show if one dialect area may be losing the language while another area is using it vigorously, which is why the present study is needed to offer up-to-date information on the Bidayuh language situation.

In fact, Ethnologue (2025) labels Bidayuh Bau and Bidayuh Biatah as endangered languages. The natural "Parent-teaching-Child" process is weakening or dying as native speakers are advanced in age and the younger generation lacks fluency. For Bidayuh Bau and Bidayuh Biatah, only the younger generation living in the villages can still speak their Bidayuh dialects fluently but not those in towns. The present-day situation is vastly different from 2006, when Bau and Biatah speakers assessed the robustness of their languages at Level 6a on the EGIDS scale during a Sustainable Use Model workshop (Hanawalt et al., 2015). On the other hand, Bidayuh Serian and Bidayuh Bukar-Sadong are stable. The social use of those varieties is widespread within the community across all age ranges (Ethnologue, 2025).

The sociolinguistics of interethnic interactions with non-Bidayuh need to be briefly described here to show the broader context. The social domains of friendship, neighborhoods, and financial transactions usually involve interactions with other ethnic groups in Malaysia. In these domains, Ting and Berek's (2021:336-337) study showed that the Bidayuh speak Iban, Sarawak Malay, Standard Malay, and English. In government departments and schools, the Bidayuh speak Sarawak Malay, Standard Malay and English, but Iban is also used in the domain of work. The findings of Kayad and Ting's (2021:41) study conducted in urban settings confirm these patterns. In neighborhoods, about one-quarter of the Bidayuh respondents speak English, Sarawak Malay, and Bidayuh. About one-fifth of the Bidayuh respondents speak Iban in social settings, particularly in churches but not much in social media. In religious, work and school contexts, a majority speak Sarawak Malay for informal communication. Language use in financial transactions is the most diverse because of the variety of ethnic groups involved in buying and selling who variously speak Sarawak Malay, Standard Malay, Iban, Bidayuh, and English. Thus, Bidayuh people need to be multilingual to interact with people in other ethnolinguistic groups, who usually cannot speak Bidayuh.

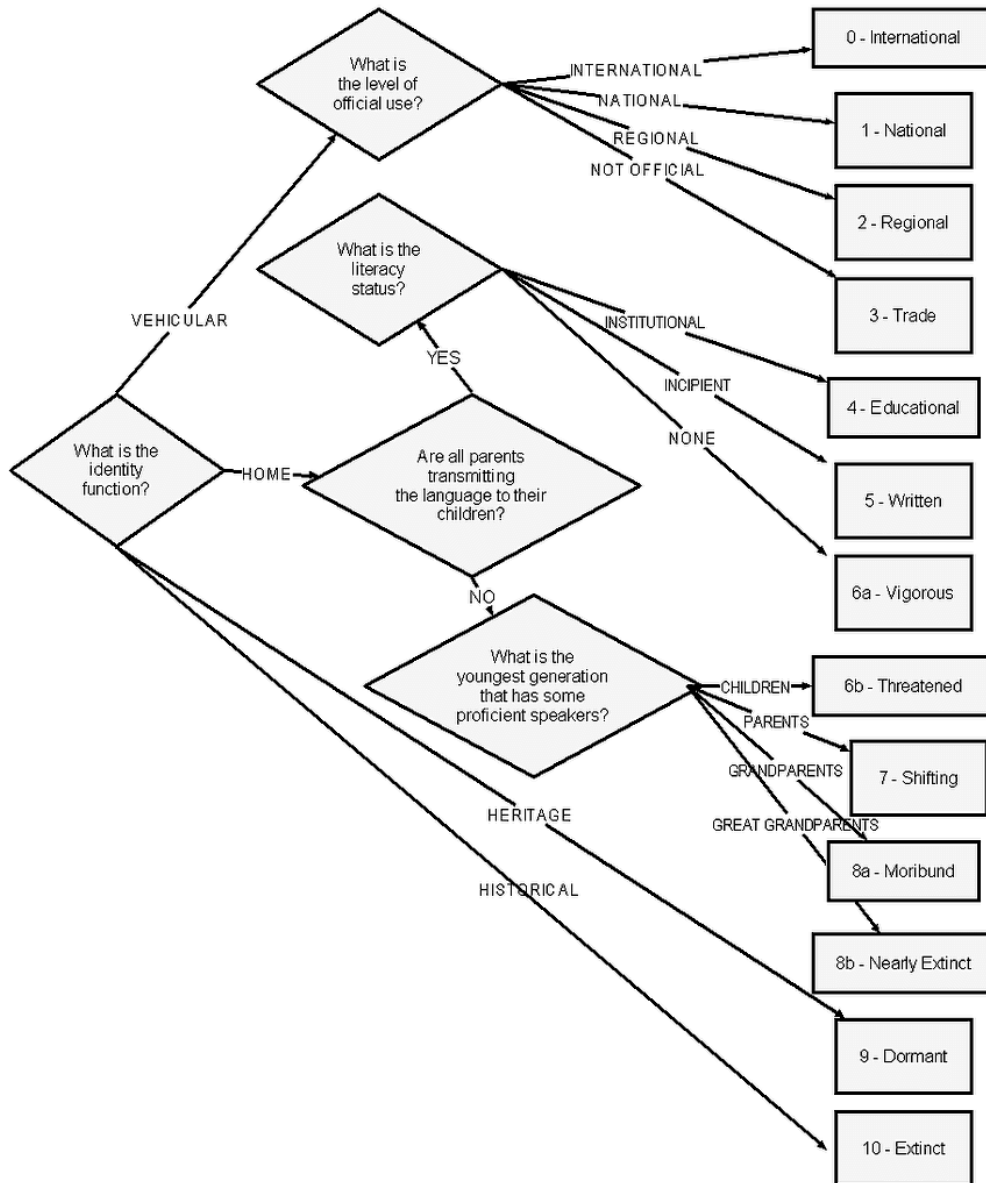
These patterns of interethnic interaction highlight the multilingual demands placed on the Bidayuh community. This situation suggests that the linguistic adaptability of the Bidayuh people is due to the limited communicative function of the Bidayuh language outside their community. Consequently, several studies have reported an ongoing language shift within the Bidayuh community toward more dominant languages such as English, Malay, and Iban (Dealwis, 2008; Norahim, 2010, 2017). While earlier assessments using EGIDS classified Bidayuh as a "Vigorous" language (Level 6a) (Hanawalt et al., 2015; Ting & Ling, 2013), over a decade has passed, and we intended to see whether the sociolinguistic landscape may have evolved. For instance, intermarriage with larger ethnic groups such as Chinese and Malay has been shown to reduce the use of Bidayuh in family communication, whereas marriages with smaller groups like the Melanau tend to support continued transmission of Bidayuh to the next generation (Ting & Berek, 2022:338).

3 Theoretical framework of study

The theoretical framework of the study is EGIDS to determine the vitality of languages, following the description of Simons and Lewis (2010:1-5). Five key questions are used to diagnose identity functions,

vehicularity, intergenerational transmission, literacy acquisition status and societal profile of generational language use, as shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3: EGIDS decision tree (source: Lewis 2010)



Languages are placed on Levels 0 to 10 (with several intermediate levels at 6a and 6b, and 8a and 8b). As a vehicle of communication, a language can serve functions at the international use (Level 0), national level (Level 1), regional level (Level 2) or for trade and social functions (Level 3).

If a language is written, and if literacy is acquired through formal learning in school, then it is an educational language (Level 4), but if a large proportion of the community has not acquired literacy, the language is at Level 5. However, if a language is spoken by all members of its community but not used in writing, then it is at level 6a (Vigorous). Among these three levels, there may be miscategorization. Simons and Lewis (2010) specify the decisions to allocate Levels 5 and 6a as follows:

The mere fact that somebody has devised a writing system or even produced a piece of printed literature is not enough to lift a language from Level 6a to Level 5. Rather, the definition requires that some segment of the language community is effectively using literacy in the language. (Simons & Lewis 2010:3)

Although Bidayuh has a writing system designed for use for a limited number of playschools, the literacy is not widespread enough in the community for it to be allocated Level 5. Simons and Lewis (2010:4) are clear

that the key indicator of Level 6a is unbroken intergenerational transmission. To be categorized as a Level 6a language, a language must meet the following five conditions of the Sustainable Use Model:

- 1) Adequate oral use exists in every domain for which oral use is desired;
- 2) There is full oral transmission of the vernacular language to all children in the home;
- 3) Members of the language community perceive the economic, social, religious, and identificational benefits of using their language orally;
- 4) Official government policy affirms the oral use of the language; and
- 5) Members of the language community have a set of shared norms as to when to use the local language orally versus when to use a more dominant language. (Simons & Lewis 2010:4)

If the language is not written, it is spoken by all generations, but some children can no longer speak the language, then it is at Level 6b (Threatened) and vulnerable to language shift. However, if the parents speak the language among themselves but do not normally transmit it to their children, then the language is at Level 7 (Shifting) and definitely endangered.

The next four levels include languages which range from severely endangered to extinct. If grandparents are proficient in a language, that language is at Level 8a (Moribund), but if the elderly speakers have little opportunity to use the language, then it is critically endangered (Level 8b, Nearly Extinct). When a language is no longer in active use but serves as a symbol of heritage identity for its community, it is dormant (Level 9). A language is considered extinct when it loses even the symbolic identity value for the community (Level 10, Extinct).

For a more solid assessment of language vitality and sustainability, EGIDS is used together with the five necessary FAMED conditions of the Sustainable Use Model (Lewis & Simons, 2010:14-19) as follows:

- F — Functions: the range of functions or domains in which a language is used (e.g., home, religion, education, media).
- A — Acquisition: the extent to which a language is learned by the next generation, i.e., intergenerational transmission.
- M — Motivation: a community's attitudes, identity, and loyalty toward its language and their motivation to maintain it.
- E — Environment: the institutional, economic, political, and social context that supports or hinders language use.
- D — Differentiation: the distinctiveness of a language compared to other varieties—whether it is recognized as a separate language or seen as a dialect.

4 Method of study

4.1 Respondents

The descriptive study involved 467 Bidayuh respondents who fulfilled the selection criteria that they are at least 18 years old and have at least one parent who identifies as ethnically Bidayuh. The sample size exceeds the minimum recommended number of 384 respondents calculated using TGM Research's (2026) sample size calculator (an online tool) based on 95% confidence level and 5% margin of error for a population size of 208,000.

Table 1 shows that there are more female (59.31%) than male respondents (40.69%), and there is a spread of age groups. A total of 39.61% were not working. There were more respondents from lower income groups (26.12% earning less than RM2,000 per month) than higher income groups (29.12% earning RM2,000-RM9,999; 5.14% earning more than RM10,000). The household monthly income categories in Malaysia are as follows: Bottom 40 (B40), Less than RM4,849; Middle 40, RM4,850-RM10,959; and Top 20, More than RM10,960 (Department of Statistics Malaysia's (DOSM) Household Income & Basic Amenities Survey Report 2022, as cited in iMoney, 2025). As for educational backgrounds, 51.61% were university degree holders, and 21.84% were college diploma holders. (Note: 1 USD = 4.5 Malaysian Ringgit approximately).

Table 1: Demographic background of Bidayuh respondents (N=467)

Demographic variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Female	277	59.31
	Male	190	40.69
Age	18-20	37	7.92
	21-30	194	41.54
	31-40	73	15.63
	41-50	97	20.77
	51-60	50	10.71
	Above 60	16	3.43
Bidayuh parentage	A little Bidayuh	2	0.43
	Half Bidayuh	130	27.84
	Pure Bidayuh	335	71.73
Monthly income	Not working	185	39.61
	Less than RM2000	122	26.12
	RM2000-RM3999	0	0.00
	RM4000-RM5999	74	15.85
	RM6000-RM7999	35	7.49
	RM8000-RM9999	27	5.78
	More than RM10000	24	5.14
Educational background	Primary 6	2	0.43
	Form 3	7	1.50
	Form 5	78	16.70
	Form 6	37	7.92
	Diploma	102	21.84
	Degree	241	51.61
Birthplace	Kuching	265	56.75
	Serian	68	14.56
	Other places in Sarawak	49	10.49
	Bau	46	9.85
	Lundu	9	1.93
	Padawan	5	1.07
	Siburan	3	0.64
	Places outside of Sarawak	21	4.50
Current residence	Kuching	276	59.10
	Other places in Sarawak	56	11.99
	Places outside of Sarawak	40	8.57
	Serian	29	6.21
	Bau	27	5.78
	Kota Samarahan	20	4.28
	Padawan	9	1.93
	Siburan	5	1.07
	Lundu	4	0.86
	Singai	1	0.21
Marital status	Not married	235	50.32
	Married	232	49.68
Spouse's ethnic group	Bidayuh	114	49.14
	Iban	39	16.81
	Chinese	21	9.05
	Other Indigenous	19	8.19
	Malay	10	4.31
	Indian	4	1.72
	Others	25	10.78
Religion	Christian	436	93.36
	Muslim	26	5.57
	No religion	4	0.86
	Buddhist	1	0.21

The data on respondents' birthplace and current residence indicate a migration trend from Bidayuh-dominant areas to urban centers, reducing daily opportunities to speak Bidayuh due to increased contact with other ethnic groups. Bidayuh-dominant towns include Serian, Bau, Padawan, Siburan, Lundu and Singai where the Bidayuh villages are located, and almost everyone living in those villages speaks a distinct Bidayuh dialect. Most respondents were not born in Bidayuh-dominant areas. 56.75% were born in Kuching, 10.49% were born elsewhere in Sarawak, and 4.50% were born outside of Sarawak.

Information on current residence shows that 59.10% live in Kuching, showing that other Bidayuh people have migrated out of Bidayuh-dominant areas to Kuching. Table 1 shows that 14.56% of respondents were born in Serian, but only 6.21% still live in Serian. A total of 9.85% were born in Bau, but only 5.78% still live there. The situation is similar for Lundu, from 1.93% at birth to 0.86% currently. On the other hand, there is a slight influx of Bidayuh respondents into Siburan, from 0.64% at birth to 1.07% currently, and Padawan, from 1.07% to 1.93% currently. Although the influx into Siburan and Padawan is minimal, it is significant for the individuals involved, as living in a strong Bidayuh-speaking environment increases their exposure to the language and supports its continued use.

Ethnic and religious intermarriage is rather common among the Bidayuh, providing a situation for the decline of the Bidayuh language as the language for family communication. A majority (71.73%) of the respondents are pure Bidayuh (both parents are Bidayuh), 27.84% are half Bidayuh (one parent is Bidayuh) and 0.43% are a little Bidayuh (one or both their parents have mixed Bidayuh ancestry). Out of the 232 respondents who are married, 114 (or 49.14%) have a Bidayuh spouse. The other half are married to other people of ethnic groups, which reduces the chance of Bidayuh being used as a language for family communication. Intermarriages of the Bidayuh are mostly with people of Iban (16.81%), Chinese (9.05%) and other Indigenous ethnicities (8.19%). There are fewer intermarriages with Malays (4.31%), which is probably why only 5.57% of the Bidayuh respondents are Muslims. The Malaysian government requires by law that non-Muslims marrying Muslims convert to Islam. All ethnic Malays are Muslim, as defined by Article 160 of the Constitution of Malaysia. The children of Bidayuh-Malay intermarriages are likely to grow up in a Malay-language environment because of the social circle and the prevalence of the Malay language in Malaysia. Most of the respondents are Christians (93.36%).

4.2 Instrument, data collection and analysis procedures

The 34-item questionnaire, adapted from Kayad and Ting (2021), consisted of sections on demographic background (13 items), language background (6 items), Bidayuh language ability (4 items), perceived value of Bidayuh language (4 items), self-described status of Bidayuh as a language of wider communication (3 items), and views on effective ways to pass on Bidayuh language to young people (3 items). The questionnaire is shown in Appendix 1. Respondents were also asked one open-ended question with an optional response, "Are you doing anything special to keep the Bidayuh language strong?" The questionnaire was in English, and worded in language that can be understood by the Bidayuh people invited to fill in the questionnaire. The idea for the status of Bidayuh as language of wider communication was based on the tool used for obtaining language data to update the Ethnologue (personal communication, David Eberhard, 24 October 2025).

The study employed a snowball sampling approach. Two research assistants distributed the Google Forms link through their social networks and various Bidayuh associations such as Dayak Bidayuh National Association (DBNA) and Association of Research and Development Movement of Singai Sarawak (REDEEMS). Respondents were also encouraged to forward the link to other Bidayuh contacts. To minimize sampling bias, the enumerators shared the link without targeting respondents based on language use or proficiency, aiming for diverse representation across ages, occupations, and residential areas. A total of 476 responses were received but nine respondents were not Bidayuh and their data were removed, leaving 467 for the descriptive analysis of means and percentages.

The patterns of results for respondents' language background, language ability and perceived value, status as language of wider communication, and intergenerational transmission of the language were used to address the five diagnostic questions in EGIDS. The focus is on diagnostic questions 3 to 5. For diagnostic question 1, the identity function of Bidayuh is not vehicular (Bidayuh is not an international, national, regional or official language), ruling out Levels 0-3. This makes diagnostic question 2 ("What is the level of official use?") irrelevant. On the other end of the EGIDS, Bidayuh is not a heritage language (Level 9) or a historical language (Level 10) as there are still living speakers. Bidayuh is a home language which leads to the relevance of diagnostic questions 3 to 5.

Thematic analysis was conducted for the open-ended responses as to whether the respondents are doing anything to keep the Bidayuh language strong. Out of 467 respondents, 255 responded to this question, but responses that did not contain specific information on their actions were deleted, such as “yes”, “no” and “not sure”. One respondent wrote “Mehh no need la”, and another wrote “Not at the moment, sorry” and “For now no, am sadly quite busy with studies” and “I wish I could”, showing two contrasting stances: lack of necessity versus inability to fulfil the obligation respectively. However, as these responses did not contain information on what they are doing, only 223 responses were finally analyzed using thematic analysis.

The responses were almost all in English, probably because the questionnaire was in English. There were two responses in Malay (*Membuka kelas bahasa bidayuh di sekolah, sekolah di Sarawak; Membuat terjemahan Al-Quran dalam bahasa Bidayuh*). Five responses were in Bidayuh, one of which contained a part in Malay (see Appendix 2). The languages and translation to English are provided.

We reread the responses several times to gain familiarity with the data and patterns. Then initial themes were identified. One particular initial theme “speaking Bidayuh” was expanded into two themes, that is, speaking with family and others because the target is different. Some respondents made an effort to incorporate Bidayuh words into their conversations to learn Bidayuh, and these were later separated from the theme “speaking Bidayuh” and categorized as a separate theme “initiatives”, which also included volunteer work to translate flyers into Bidayuh. The responses were coded based on the themes, and the coding was checked several times before frequencies were counted.

5 Results

The following sections show the Bidayuh respondents’ language background and use, their language ability in Bidayuh, the respondents’ perception of Bidayuh’s instrumental and affective value, the status of Bidayuh as a language of wider communication, intergenerational transmission of the language, and community-based language revival efforts.

5.1 Bidayuh language background

Table 2 shows the Bidayuh language background of respondents in terms of the Bidayuh dialect(s) they speak, first language, absence or presence of formal learning of Bidayuh, and approximate characterization of how often they speak Bidayuh.

Association and SIL International set up a mother tongue-based program with a UNESCO grant, beginning with five playschools in 2007 and expanding to fourteen in nine villages (Joyik et al. 2017). Later, inadequate finance, students, teachers and parental support led to a decrease in number of playschools (Kayad et al. 2022a:95-100). The nine teachers and 24 parents from four Bidayuh villages (Benuk, Sinjok, Apar and Pasir Hilir) were happy with the children’s personal development, academic achievement, and language and cultural maintenance. Sustaining mother tongue-based education program is challenging, and only four playschools are still operating (Benuk and Sinjok in Padawan, Bogag in Bau, and Gahat Mawang in Serian) (Riget & Campbell 2020:113). As the number of schools in the mother tongue-education program has dwindled, this reduces opportunities for formal learning of Bidayuh.

Respondents were asked how frequently they speak Bidayuh and 66.60% speak Bidayuh almost every day. Table 2 shows that Bidayuh is the first language for 72.16% of the Bidayuh respondents. Other respondents speak Bidayuh only 1-2 times (13.70%) or 3-5 times (8.78%) per week, which is not often. It needs to be noted that 10.92% (or 51 out of 467 respondents) do not speak any Bidayuh. The result confirms Kayad and Ting’s (2022b:25) preliminary study of 61 Bidayuh participants from Kuching, where 18.03% did not speak Bidayuh at all. This shows that there is broken intergenerational transmission, and Bidayuh cannot be on Level 6a (Vigorous).

The audio-visual materials in Bidayuh most accessed by the respondents are Bidayuh songs (72.16%), and radio programs (64.88%). Bidayuh radio programs can be heard on WaiFM (<https://online-radio.my/569-wai-fm-bidayuh.html>), based in Kuching, Sarawak and provides music, news, and talk shows. Nearly half (42.61%) of the respondents also watch videos in Bidayuh, mostly on YouTube. Few respondents have been in situations where Bidayuh is used formally such as meetings (21.84%) and lessons in classroom settings (10.92%).

Table 2: Language background of Bidayuh respondents (N=467)

Language background	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Which Bidayuh dialect can you speak?	Bau [Singgai-Jagoi]	226	48.39
	Biatah [Biatah-Penrissen]	166	35.55
	Serian [Bukar-Sadung]	138	29.55
	Salako Rara	10	2.14
	Other Bidayuh dialect	46	9.85
	Cannot speak Bidayuh	15	3.21
Which language did you first speak as a child?	Bidayuh	337	72.16
	English	68	14.56
	Iban	24	5.14
	Standard Malay	18	3.85
	Malay dialect	12	2.57
	Others	5	1.07
	Chinese/Chinese dialects	3	0.64
Did you learn Bidayuh in playschool/ kindergarten?	No	453	97.00
	Yes	14	3.00
How often do you speak Bidayuh?	Not at all	51	10.92
	1-2 times per week	64	13.70
	3-5 times per week	41	8.78
	Almost everyday	311	66.60
Have you listened to/watched any of these materials in Bidayuh?	None	24	5.14
	Songs	337	72.16
	Radio	303	64.88
	Video	199	42.61
	Meetings	102	21.84
	Lessons	51	10.92
Have you read any of these materials in Bidayuh?	None	107	22.91
	Dictionary	253	54.18
	Story book	161	34.48
	Magazine	72	15.42
	Textbook	26	5.57
	Which language do you use the most for prayers?	Bidayuh	7
	English	25	5.35
	Iban	2	0.42
	Malay dialect	1	0.21
	Standard Malay	1	0.21
	Other indigenous languages	1	0.21

Note: The square brackets show terms used by Rensch (2006:2), but the questionnaire contains terms commonly used by the Bidayuh community for comprehensibility. Bukar-Sadung is spoken in Serian, Singgai-Jagoi in Bau, Salako-Rara in Lundu, Padawan-Sembaan in Padawan, and Biatah-Penrissen in Siburan.

As for literacy in Bidayuh, 22.91% of the respondents have never read materials written in Bidayuh. By implication, a large majority, over three-quarters have read materials in Bidayuh. 54.18% have referred to Bidayuh dictionaries. A total of 34.48% have read Bidayuh story books. An example of a story book in Bidayuh is Heidi Munan’s *Cerita Rakyat Orang Bidayuh* (Bidayuh folktales). Smaller numbers have read Bidayuh magazines (15.42%) and textbooks (5.57%). There are few sustained publication of Bidayuh magazines, unlike the Iban who have the Pegari magazine, which is written in the Iban language (<https://www.facebook.com/people/Pegari-majalah-iban/100066248332492/>). Bidayuh people have little opportunity to read in Bidayuh as there are few publications in Bidayuh, and it is largely an oral language.

Finally, as for religious background, 93.36% of the 467 respondents are Christians. In urban areas, they attend church services either in English or Standard Malay, but in some churches located in Bidayuh villages, preaching is conducted in the Bidayuh dialect of the area. In the questionnaire, respondents were asked which language they used the most when praying. The most frequently used language, reported by 25 respondents (5.35%) is English, and only seven (1.50%) stated that they pray in Bidayuh. The use of other languages for

praying (Iban, Malay dialects, Standard Malay, or other indigenous languages) is infrequent. In religious communicative contexts, Bidayuh is hardly used. An earlier study on language use patterns of 101 Bidayuh respondents in mixed marriages with Melanau, Chinese and Malay showed that Standard Malay was used by almost all the respondents for praying and in the religious community, followed closely by Sarawak Malay dialect (Ting & Berek 2021:335). However, English and Bidayuh were used by about half of the respondents and Standard Chinese by about one-third of the respondents. Ting and Berek (2021:335) also found that Bidayuh, Standard Chinese and Sarawak Malay dialect were used more often for communicating with other Christians than for praying. The use of English for both purposes was similar. Taken together, Ting and Berek (2021:335) indicate that Bidayuh respondents in mixed marriages tended to attend church services in Malay rather than English. In the present study, English is the most used language for saying prayers, but only 51.86% of the married respondents in the present study were in mixed marriages (Table 1). Out of 467 respondents, 49.68% were married at the time of the study. The mixed marriage situation provides a situation where some respondents may use the languages spoken by the spouses for family communication or choose shared languages. A common result across the two studies is that Bidayuh is not frequently used for communication in religious situations.

5.2 Bidayuh language ability of the respondents

Table 3 shows the Bidayuh language ability of respondents. Among the four language skills, most (83.94%) of the respondents report ease of understanding spoken Bidayuh, and only somewhat fewer (77.09%) report ease of speaking it. The reported rate of literacy skills was moderate, with 65.95% of the respondents able to understand written texts and 61.46% able to write in Bidayuh. As a primarily oral language, Bidayuh is primarily used for everyday conversation, with reading and writing largely confined to social media interactions.

Table 3: Language ability of Bidayuh respondents (N=467)

Skill	Category	Frequency	Percentage
I can speak Bidayuh fluently (any variety).	Disagree	71	15.20
	Unsure	36	7.71
	Agree	360	77.09
I can easily understand a conversation in Bidayuh (any variety).	Disagree	41	8.78
	Unsure	34	7.28
	Agree	392	83.94
I can easily understand books and articles in Bidayuh (any variety).	Disagree	65	13.92
	Unsure	94	20.13
	Agree	308	65.95
I can easily write anything in Bidayuh (variety).	Disagree	97	20.77
	Unsure	83	17.77
	Agree	287	61.46

While 60% to 80% of Bidayuh respondents claim they possess sufficient language skills to support continued use, these positive results do not provide a complete picture. In fact, 8% to 15% disagreed they had good oracy skills, with 7.5% uncertain. For literacy, 13% to 21% reported low confidence, and 9% were unsure, indicating that up to 30% lack confidence in their written Bidayuh abilities. Additionally, 3.21% stated they cannot speak Bidayuh at all (Table 2). This points to gaps in intergenerational transmission, suggesting the language does not meet the criteria for EGIDS Level 6a.

5.3 Perceptions of the instrumental and affective value of the Bidayuh language

Table 4 presents the Bidayuh survey respondents’ perceptions of the instrumental and affective value of their language. Instrumental value, linked to economic, social, and religious utility, was perceived as low: only 0.86% found Bidayuh useful for studies, 1.50% for careers, and 3.43% for political influence in Sarawak. English was seen as most useful for education (86.08%) and employment (78.80%), while Standard Malay was viewed as the strongest politically (51.39%), reflecting its role as the national and official language. Interestingly, Iban ranked second in political strength (24.63%) and English third (16.92%). Despite this,

Bidayuh holds the highest affective value (55.23%) as a symbol of identity, ahead of English (34.48%). On the other hand, it is English that carries both instrumental and affective value, posing a threat to the vitality of Bidayuh, especially among younger speakers and those of mixed heritage who may gradually shift toward English.

Table 4: Perceptions of the instrumental and affective value of Bidayuh language

Language	Bidayuh	English	Malay dialect	Standard Malay	Chinese (including dialects)	Iban	Others
<i>Most useful language for career</i>	7 (1.50%)	368 (78.80%)	8 (1.71%)	67 (14.35%)	10 (2.14%)	2 (0.43%)	5 (1.07%)
<i>Most useful language in studies</i>	4 (0.86%)	402 (86.08%)	3 (0.64%)	50 (10.71%)	2 (0.43%)	0	6 (1.28%)
<i>Strongest language in Sarawak</i>	16 (3.43%)	79 (16.92%)	240 (51.39%)	8 (1.71%)	3 (0.64%)	115 (24.63%)	6 (1.28+%)
<i>Most loved language</i>	258 (55.23%)	161 (34.48%)	18 (3.85%)	4 (0.86%)	5 (1.07%)	13 (2.78%)	8 (1.71%)

5.4 Status of Bidayuh as a language of wider communication

Table 5 shows Bidayuh respondents’ perceptions of status of Bidayuh as a language of wider communication. This questionnaire item is based on the Ethnologue methodology for updating language vitality status (Eberhard et al., 2025), in which respondents are asked about the second language population in an interview context (“How many people who are not part of this ethnic group can speak this language?”). However, the present study uses a questionnaire which does not have the flexibility of follow-up, which is why respondents were asked to estimate the population of other ethnic groups that can speak Bidayuh to gauge the perceived vitality of their language among non-Bidayuh.

For Item 1, 21.41% of respondents were unsure how many people in Sarawak speak Bidayuh, while 52.46% overestimated the number as over 250,000—exceeding the actual Bidayuh ethnic population of 208,000. Only 26.12% made accurate estimates below this figure. Item 2 indicates that Bidayuh is spoken beyond the ethnic community. Nearly 80% of respondents reported knowing non-Bidayuh individuals who speak the language, likely due to people acquiring the language from years of living in Bidayuh-majority areas such as Bau, Serian, and Siburan.

For Item 3 regarding language loss, 78% knew Bidayuh individuals who cannot speak the language, aligning with earlier findings that 3.21% of respondents cannot speak Bidayuh and 10.92% had not spoken it in the week prior to the study. The earlier results (Table 2) show that 72.16% speak Bidayuh as their first language, and this is a pertinent result because the EGIDS levels measure the number of fluent first language speakers). This means that 27.84% do not speak Bidayuh as a first language, including 3.21% who do not have the ability to speak Bidayuh, and 24.63% who can speak Bidayuh as a second language. EGIDS does not measure second language speakers (except at Level 9 which is only for identity purposes). This is because the children of second language speakers of a minority language tend to speak it less frequently than their parents do. The result concurs with the self-reporting of fluency in Bidayuh, in which 77.09% say they speak Bidayuh fluently (Table 3). It can be inferred that the 77.09% comprises 72.16% first language speakers and 4.93% second language speakers of Bidayuh. Taken together, the statistics on loss of Bidayuh among children, language mastery, and general use among children (3.21%) clearly show the vitality of Bidayuh is at Level 6b (Threatened). Bidayuh is definitely not at Level 6a (Vigorous) because not all children learn it as their first language.

Table 5: Perceptions of status of Bidayuh as a language of wider communication

Dimension	Category	Frequency	Percentage
The Sarawak population is 2.6 million. In your opinion, how many people can speak Bidayuh in Sarawak now?	I don't know	100	21.41
	Less than 250,000	122	26.12
	250,000-500,000	139	29.76
	Half to 1 million	70	14.99
	1 to 2 million	25	5.35
	More than 2 million	11	2.36
Do you know any non-Bidayuh people who are able to speak Bidayuh?	None	95	20.34
	Less than 10	233	49.89
	10-50 persons	101	21.63
	50-100 persons	22	4.71
	100-500 persons	6	1.28
	More than 500 persons	10	2.14
Do you know any Bidayuh people who cannot speak Bidayuh?	More than 500 Bidayuh cannot speak Bidayuh	8	1.71
	100-500 Bidayuh	5	1.07
	50-100 Bidayuh	22	4.71
	10-50 Bidayuh	109	23.34
	Less than 10 Bidayuh	218	46.68
	Every Bidayuh can speak Bidayuh	105	22.48

5.5 Intergenerational transmission of the language

Based on languages used the most by the Bidayuh respondents with their parents and children (Table 6), the Bidayuh language is at Level 6b (Threatened). The results show weakening intergenerational use of Bidayuh. While 73.88% (345) of respondents reported their parents spoke Bidayuh with them, only 29.15% of 295 respondents with children are passing the language on. In other words, over 70% of Bidayuh parents are not transmitting it to their children, adding more support for an EGIDS 6b level. Further evidence of the downward trend in intergenerational transmission of Bidayuh can be seen from the declining percentages of respondents who speak Bidayuh with their parents: 82.20% of those in their thirties, 60.10% in their twenties, and only 35.14% of those aged 18 to 20. Bidayuh has not yet reached Level 7 (Shifting), at which the youngest proficient speakers are limited to the parental generation.

Table 6: Languages used most frequently with parents and children

Language	Bidayuh	English	Malay dialect	Standard Malay	Chinese (including dialects)	Iban	Others
Language used the most with parents (N=467)	345 (73.88%)	60 (12.85%)	15 (3.21%)	15 (3.21%)	2 (0.43%)	25 (5.35%)	5 (1.07%)
Language used the most with children (N=295)	86 (29.15%)	68 (23.05%)	15 (5.08%)	13 (4.41%)	0	7 (2.37%)	7 (2.37%)

Table 7 presents respondents' views on effective methods to transmit the Bidayuh language to youth. Many (56.10%) felt that speaking Bidayuh at home is the most effective, while 24.41% highlighted the importance of community-based activities, such as Gawai and Christmas celebrations. These gatherings create a natural Bidayuh-speaking environment, exposing younger members to the language in meaningful social contexts and reinforcing its relevance today.

Table 7: Perceptions of effective ways to pass on Bidayuh language to young people

Item	Way	Frequency	Percentage
In your opinion, which is the most effective way to pass on the Bidayuh language to young people?	Speak Bidayuh with family	262	56.10
	Community activities	114	24.41
	Television programs	42	8.99
	Use Bidayuh in social media	27	5.78
	Printed materials	15	3.21
	More radio programs	7	1.50
	Teach Bidayuh in school	0	0.00
Special actions to keep the Bidayuh language strong*	Speak with family	71	31.84
	Speak with friends and others	69	30.94
	Self-learning of Bidayuh	27	12.11
	Documentation and work with non-governmental organisations	23	10.31
	Supporting Bidayuh culture	15	6.73
	Suggested actions for others	9	4.04
	Use in social media, blog	5	2.24
	Teach Bidayuh formally	4	1.79

Note: *A total of 223 responded to this item with specific actions.

Some survey respondents said that television programs and social media use can foster some use of Bidayuh among the younger Bidayuh (8.99% and 5.78% respectively). In the digital era, Bidayuh of the younger generation access internet resources for information rather than printed materials and entertainment rather than television and radio.

None of the respondents believe that teaching Bidayuh in school is an effective way to pass on the Bidayuh language to young people. To them, the best intergenerational transmission strategy is to speak the language with family, and the open-ended responses concur with the questionnaire results on this. Next, the respondents' views on ways to ensure future survival of their language are described. Excerpts from the open-ended responses in the questionnaire are used to illustrate the methods used by the respondents. Some of the responses were written with full-stops and others without. For responses in Malay and Bidayuh, translation to English is provided in square brackets.

Of the 223 respondents who answered the open-ended question on ways to maintain the Bidayuh language, 140 reported actively speaking it (71 with family and 69 with friends and others). One respondent noted, "I teach my non-Bidayuh husband Bidayuh", while others emphasized speaking Bidayuh with their children regardless of setting.

In addition, 27 respondents described personal efforts to learn or strengthen their Bidayuh language skills. One respondent made an effort to speak it more often ("Not anything special but I'm just trying to keep this culture alive in myself first and speaking the language even more ...") because of pride in being born a Bidayuh. Another participant listened to Bidayuh songs ("I keep listening to Bidayuh radio programs and songs on Youtube to keep my Bidayuh language on track"). Keeping a word journal is another personal effort to strengthen Bidayuh language skills ("I personally actively keep a small journal of words I just learned and ask my mom about it"). Counting in Bidayuh is another initiative ("I count in Bidayuh language"). These self-initiated strategies reflect a shift towards practical, everyday use over traditional media like print, television, or radio.

- "Not anything special but I'm just trying to keep this culture alive in myself first and speaking the language even more because I'm proud being born a Bidayuh"
- "I keep listening to Bidayuh radio programs and songs on Youtube to keep my Bidayuh language on track."
- "I personally actively keep a small journal of words I just learned and ask my mom about it :)"
- "I count in Bidayuh language :)"

5.6 Community-based language revival efforts

To support the vitality of the Bidayuh language, 23 respondents suggested revival efforts using technology, and community involvement. Some had engaged in documentation efforts, including developing dictionary

apps, compiling word lists, translation, and conducting research. A respondent built “a community driven dictionary app/website”. Another respondent wrote “I’m trying to build a word list to compare the difference between the spoken Bidayuh dialect as from Lundu - Bau - Kuching - Serian. (Salako-Jagoi/Singgai/Semeba-Biatah- Bukar Sadong)”. Another type of initiative involved translation and research into use of Bidayuh language for medical use (“Collaborating with friends working at the hospital in translating to Bidayuh language (biatah) for medical information update in flyers”) and religious purposes (“Membuat terjemahan Al-Quran dalam Bahasa Bidayuh”). These initiatives reflect a growing community awareness of the urgency to preserve and promote the language, especially among Bidayuh in the younger generation. Respondents emphasized the importance of creating accessible and practical tools that could be integrated into daily communication and education.

- “Building a community driven dictionary app/website”
- “I’m trying to build a word list to compare the difference between the spoken Bidayuh dialect as from Lundu - Bau - Kuching - Serian. (Salako-Jagoi/Singgai/Semeba-Biatah-Bukar Sadong)”
- “Collaborating with friends working at the hospital in translating to Bidayuh language (biatah) for medical information update in flyers”
- “Membuat terjemahan Al-Quran dalam bahasa Bidayuh” [Do translation of the Al-Quran in Bidayuh]

Respondents also reported engaging in creative and cultural documentation efforts that go beyond language use in everyday conversation. One respondent collected *dondan* (traditional folktales) (“Keeping and collecting *dondan*”). There were at least two respondents who wrote songs because one respondent identified as “Bidayuh Song writer, Bidayuh singer, youtuber for Bidayuh culture and dance”. Another respondent had composed songs (“I am composing a Bidayuh song ...”). The respondent had composed two patriotic songs (“WARKAH untuk Tuanku and Dato’ Kanang Anak Langkau”). A YouTube video shows the song “Warkah untuk Tuanku” performed in the Johara Tour in Johor Bahru (<http://youtube.era.fm> Instagram). “Dato’ Kanang Anak Langkau” is a song written for the historical biography film about the life of an Iban warrior during the insurgency (<https://youtu.be/1Xf4A-ho4hE>). Another respondent writes and shares short stories in the Bidayuh language on social media (“I am trying my best to make a story in Bidayuh language and expose it on social media”). Besides creative work to use the Bidayuh language in contemporary contexts, there was also effort to revive traditional songs (“I am trying to dig up Boris song and traditional lullabies that were chanted during festivals or activities and those my grandparents used to sing to me when i was younger”). She eventually hoped to create modern musical arrangements to introduce the traditional lullabies to members of the younger generation. Some respondents noted that gaining visibility as social media influencers could enhance the prestige of Bidayuh identity and the Bidayuh language, indirectly encouraging its use among people in the younger generation. These activities demonstrate a strong commitment to preserving oral heritage and making it accessible to them through contemporary formats.

- “Keeping and collecting *dondan*”
- “Bidayuh Song writer, Bidayuh singer, youtuber for Bidayuh culture and dance”
- “I am composing a Bidayuh song. I have composed two patriotic songs available in YouTube, WARKAH untuk Tuanku and Dato' Kanang Anak Langkau.”
- “I am trying my best to make a story in Bidayuh language and expose it on social media”
- “While researching and studying the language, so I can speak it fluently one day, I am trying to dig up Boris song and traditional lullabies that were chanted during festivals or activities and those my grandparents used to sing to me when i was younger. With some of them, I'm in the process of recreating the songs and making new arrangements for the younger generations to hear them in a new light as well.”

Some respondents also contribute to preservation of the Bidayuh cultural heritage through non-governmental organizations promoting Bidayuh and other indigenous languages, such as Association of Research and Development Movement of Singai Sarawak (REDEEMS), Dayak Bidayuh National Association (DBNA), and the Bung Bratak Heritage Centre. Beyond preservation, these efforts extend to creative expression, highlighting the active and evolving use of the language.

- “I am doing a research on Bidayuh cultural heritage for my final year project.”
- “Working at Bung Bratak Heritage Centre enables me to help promote Bidayuh language and culture to public.”
- “Joining DBNA as part of learning Bidayuh culture n language n also socializing”

Fifteen respondents viewed the sustainability of the Bidayuh language as closely tied to the promotion of cultural identity and community values. One respondent wrote “Be proud and humble, as well be a multilingual person because people will slowly take an interest in our language”. Other respondents mentioned visiting cultural centers, encouraging intercultural exchange by bringing non-Bidayuh friends to their villages (“Bring my friends to my Village”), and expressing a commitment to marrying within the community to preserve Bidayuh lineage (“Carry on the Bidayuh bloodline”). In mixed marriages, the tendency is to speak other languages such as English, Malay or even Iban. The rates of Bidayuh whose parents are both Bidayuh range from over 85% among older Bidayuh down to 45% among younger Bidayuh (Ting et al. 2025), which highlights that notable numbers of Bidayuh households involve mixed marriages. Marrying within the community was seen as a way to maintain intergenerational transmission of the language, ensuring that children grow up in environments where Bidayuh is spoken and cultural practices are upheld.

- “Be proud and humble, as well be a multilingual person because people will slowly take an interest in our language”
- “Bring my friends to My Village”
- “Carry on the Bidayuh bloodline”

Nine respondents proposed actions for others in the Bidayuh community to support Bidayuh language maintenance, primarily through community and cultural initiatives. For example, “have more community activities on Bidayuh cultures and programme”. The only specific suggestion was promoting Bidayuh food and culture “By promoting the food and culture. DNBA should do more instead of to many organising dinners”. Other possible activities include musical performances, arts and crafts exhibitions, and cultural tours to historical sites.

- “Have more community activities on Bidayuh cultures and programme”
- “By promoting the food and culture. DBNA should do more instead of to many organising dinners”
- “*Membuka kelas bahasa bidayuh di sekolah, sekolah di sarawak.*” (Open up Bidayuh classes in schools in Sarawak)

Five respondents reported promoting Bidayuh via social media through posts, blogs, and the use of proper spelling in WhatsApp groups, while four others are involved in teaching Bidayuh classes. Some respondents used Bidayuh in social media, indicated by responses like “I write Bidayuh in my social media sometimes and teach people around me that are interested to learn Bidayuh” and “Practicing proper Bidayuh spelling when write in Bidayuh Bintulu WA”. A particular respondent was actively using Facebook to promote Bidayuh culture (“Posting anything related with Bidayuh culture or language on my Facebook so that more and more younger generations or even other people from other ethnicities know about my language.”) These efforts reflect a shift toward digital literacy, emphasizing the creation and dissemination of Bidayuh content online over traditional print media.

- “I write Bidayuh in my social media sometimes and teach people around me that are interested to learn Bidayuh”
- “Practicing proper Bidayuh spelling when write in Bidayuh Bintulu group WA. Join activity organised by DBNA.”
- “Posting anything related with Bidayuh culture or language on my Facebook so that more and more younger generations or even other people from other ethnicities know about my language.”

Triangulating the fixed and open-ended responses on effective transmission of Bidayuh to the next generation points to recognition of the value of speaking Bidayuh as extensively as possible. Many respondents reported efforts to improve their own language skills to better support the continued use of Bidayuh in the community. One respondent emphasized personal responsibility, stating, “I don’t think I can do anything special because it depends on oneself to either speak or not to speak Bidayuh”, highlighting the individual’s personal initiative in language preservation.

6 Discussion

The study reassessing the vitality of Bidayuh language produced three noteworthy findings which will be discussed in this section.

First, based on the current study, Bidayuh vitality is classified at EGIDS Level 6b (Threatened). It does not qualify for Levels 5, 6a, or 6b for several reasons. Bidayuh is not at Level 5 (Written) primarily because it lacks standardization and a standardized spelling system, resulting in limited literacy status (Diagnostic question 3). Bidayuh does not have adequate literature in a standardized form and effective use of the written language by the language community to qualify it for EGIDS Level 5 (Written). Unlike Iban, which has been taught in schools since 1968, Bidayuh is not part of the formal school curriculum. According to a language policy in Malaysia, introducing an indigenous language as a school subject requires a minimum of 15 parental requests under the Pupil's Own Language policy (Stephen et al. 2022:27), a challenge given the small number of Bidayuh children in any one school. Additionally, Riget and Campbell (2022:114) reported that some parents preferred to teach Bidayuh at home and did not see a need for formal lessons in Bidayuh, while other parents said that it is more important for their children to learn Malay or English. When parents have these views, it means that they would not request for Bidayuh to be taught as a subject in playschool, preschool or in school.

Next, Bidayuh no longer qualifies as EGIDS Level 6a (Vigorous), contrary to earlier findings (Hanawalt et al. 2015; Ting & Ling 2013). This is primarily due to broken intergenerational transmission in some families (Diagnostic question 4). Level 6a requires meeting five conditions of the Sustainable Use Model, but Bidayuh fails three: (1) adequate oral use exists in all desired domains; (2) full oral transmission occurs to all children at home; and (3) the community perceives economic, social, religious, and identity benefits from oral use (Simons & Lewis 2010). Regarding the first condition, oral use of Bidayuh is inadequate across many domains. Kayad and Ting (2022b:31-32) identified family as the only exclusively Bidayuh domain, while the friendship, neighborhood, transactions, and social media domains are shared with Iban, Sarawak Malay, and English. The current study with 467 respondents reveals that even the family domain sees the influx of English, Malay dialects, Standard Malay, Iban, and Chinese, often due to mixed marriages. Bidayuh is rarely used in the domains of work, government, education, religion, or mass media. Revitalization depends on Bidayuh speakers maximizing opportunities to converse informally in their language. This limitation stems not from government policy because the Malaysian government does not suppress ethnic languages, but from individual speaker choices.

For the second condition, oral transmission to children is incomplete. Our data show 3.21% of children do not have the ability to speak Bidayuh, and 10.92% do not speak it at all. This means 7.71% may have the ability to speak Bidayuh but do not use the language, confirming Bidayuh cannot be classified at Level 6a. A majority (75-85%) reported strong oracy skills and sufficient literacy skills (60-65%). These precise figures contrast with earlier qualitative (Riget & Campbell 2020) and quantitative studies (Coluzzi et al. 2013). Finally, respondents regard English as more useful for academic, work, and social purposes, relegating Bidayuh largely to identity functions. This poses a significant threat not previously documented in detail, where past studies noted pride or future benefits without addressing the dominance of English (Coluzzi et al. 2013; McLellan & Campbell 2015). Given that Bidayuh does not meet these critical conditions, its vitality is below Level 6a. However, as children remain the youngest proficient generation (Diagnostic question 5), Bidayuh is classified at Level 6b (Threatened) rather than Level 7 (Shifting), where parents are the youngest proficient speakers.

Finally, Bidayuh respondents recognize the language's vulnerable status at Level 6b (Threatened) and the need for revitalization by reducing dominant language use. The sustainability of Bidayuh depends on the community seeing economic, social, and religious benefits in speaking Bidayuh and to use it as the main home language. While traditional activities like folktales and cultural shows may not engage younger generations, respondents emphasize speaking Bidayuh with family and friends, supported by community events. Language use is closely tied to cultural life in the village, with festivals like Gawai playing a key role in maintaining identity and intergenerational transmission. However, urbanization and the loss of elders may weaken these cultural connections over time.

7 Conclusion

This study on language vitality reassessment and revival for the Bidayuh of Sarawak, Malaysia, shows that it is at EGIDS Level 6b (Threatened). Importantly, Bidayuh speakers recognize their language's vulnerable status and view daily use within families as key to its survival. The findings highlight the critical need for expanding

oral use across all sociolinguistic domains, ensuring all children learn Bidayuh as a first language, and increasing its perceived value, especially in mixed marriages and urban contexts. A novel contribution of this study is the finding that cultural immersion may be crucial in anchoring the younger generation to the Bidayuh language. Community-based efforts combining technology, cultural promotion, and social engagement are ongoing but these are limited to a small number of Bidayuh people. Future research should investigate how engagement with Bidayuh culture and village life influences intergenerational language use, providing deeper insight into sustaining indigenous languages amid modernization. These studies will reveal the effectiveness of revival efforts to reach the whole community.

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Author Contributions

SHT and FGK conceptualized the project. SHT formulated the instruments. FGK managed the data collection. SHT analysed the data. SHT took the lead in writing the manuscript with input from FGK.

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Appendix 1: Bidayuh Language Vitality Questionnaire

Research on Bidayuh Language

If you are a Bidayuh, we would like to invite you to participate in this study on Bidayuh language. We are from Universiti Malaysia Sarawak and would like to find out the views of Bidayuh people on the language and culture. This research is funded by the Dayak Research Chair, UNIMAS. We would appreciate it very much if you can give us 10-15 minutes to fill in the questionnaire.

Do you agree to participate in the study? Please tick the following if you agree to participate in the study.

- a) I understand that my participation in the study is voluntary, and that if I no longer wish to participate, I can withdraw up to two weeks after completing the questionnaire. I do not have to give any reasons for doing so. I have been provided with details of whom I should contact if I wish to withdraw.
- b) I fit the participation criteria – I am aged 18 or older.
- c) I understand that all data I provide will be kept confidential and stored securely at Universiti Malaysia Sarawak. Only the researchers will have access to this.
- d) I understand that the results of the study will be shared through conferences and/or published articles. I understand that my data will remain anonymous at all times.
- e) I understand that the questionnaire cannot be disclosed to other parties or reproduced without the researchers' consent.

Yes, I have read and understood this information and agree to take part in the study.

A. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

1. Town where you were born. _____

2. Town you are living in now. _____

3. Gender

Female

Male

4. Age

19 years old and below

- 20 – 29
- 30 – 39
- 40 – 49
- 50 – 59
- 60 years old and above

5. Ethnic group

- Pure/Full Bidayuh
- Half Bidayuh
- A little Bidayuh
- Other ethnic groups

6. Father's Ethnic Group *

- Berawan
- Bidayuh
- Bisaya
- Bukitan
- Chinese
- Eurasian
- Iban
- Indian
- Kayan
- Kedayan
- Kejaman
- Kelabit
- Kenyah
- Lahanan
- Lunbawang
- Malay
- Melanau
- Penan
- Punan
- Remun
- Sa'ban
- Sebop
- Sekapan
- Selako
- Sihan
- Ukit
- Other

6. Mother's Ethnic Group

- Berawan
- Bidayuh
- Bisaya
- Bukitan
- Chinese
- Eurasian
- Iban
- Indian
- Kayan
- Kedayan
- Kejaman
- Kelabit

- Kenyah
- Lahanan
- Lunbawang
- Malay
- Melanau
- Penan
- Punan
- Remun
- Sa'ban
- Sebop
- Sekapan
- Selako
- Sihan
- Ukit
- Other

8. Marital Status

- Single
- Married
- Divorced/Widowed

9. Wife/Husband's Ethnic Group

- Berawan
- Bidayuh
- Bisaya
- Bukitan
- Chinese
- Eurasian
- Iban
- Indian
- Kayan
- Kedayan
- Kejaman
- Kelabit
- Kenyah
- Lahanan
- Lunbawang
- Malay
- Melanau
- Penan
- Punan
- Remun
- Sa'ban
- Sebop
- Sekapan
- Selako
- Sihan
- Ukit
- Other

10. Your religion

- No Religion
- Bahai
- Buddhist

- Christian
- Hindu
- Muslim
- Other

11. Your current job _____

12. Your monthly Income

- Not working
- Less than RM2,000
- RM2,000 – RM3,999
- RM4,000 – RM5,999
- RM6,000 – RM7,999
- RM8,000 – RM9,999
- RM10,000 and above

13. Your highest Educational Qualification

- Primary 6 or lower
- Form 3
- Form 5
- Form 6
- Certificate
- Diploma
- Degree and higher

B. LANGUAGE BACKGROUND

1. Which language did you first speak as a child?

- Bidayuh
- Chinese Dialect
- English
- Iban
- Local Sarawak Malay
- Mandarin
- Melanau
- Standard Malay
- Tamil
- Other

2. Did you learn Bidayuh in playschool/kindergarten?

- Did not learn Bidayuh in playschool/kindergarten
- Learnt Bidayuh in kindergarten

3. Do/Did your children learn Bidayuh in playschool/kindergarten?

- I do not have children
- My children did not learn Bidayuh in playschool/kindergarten

4. Which Bidayuh variety do you speak?

- Cannot speak Bidayuh
- Biatah
- Bau
- Serian
- Salako Rara
- Other Bidayuh languages

5. This week, how often have you spoken Bidayuh (any variety)?

- Not at all
- 1-2 times this week
- 3-5 times this week
- Almost everyday

6. I can speak Bidayuh fluently (any variety).

- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- Unsure
- Agree
- Strongly Agree

C. BIDAYUH LANGUAGE ABILITY

1. I can easily understand a conversation in Bidayuh (any variety).

- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- Unsure
- Agree
- Strongly Agree

2. I can easily understand books and articles in Bidayuh (any variety). *

- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- Unsure
- Agree
- Strongly Agree

3. I can easily speak anything in Bidayuh (any variety).

- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- Unsure
- Agree
- Strongly Agree

4. I can easily write anything in Bidayuh (any variety).

- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- Unsure
- Agree
- Strongly Agree

D. PERCEIVED VALUE OF BIDAYUH LANGUAGE

1. Which of these languages is the most USEFUL FOR YOUR CAREER?

- Bidayuh
- Chinese Dialect
- English
- Iban
- Local Sarawak Malay
- Mandarin
- Melanau
- Standard Malay
- Tamil
- Others

2. Which of these languages is the most USEFUL IN YOUR STUDIES?

- Bidayuh
- Chinese Dialect
- English
- Iban
- Local Sarawak Malay
- Mandarin
- Melanau
- Standard Malay
- Tamil
- Others

3. Which of these languages do you LOVE the most?

- Bidayuh
- Chinese Dialect
- English
- Iban
- Local Sarawak Malay
- Mandarin
- Melanau
- Standard Malay
- Tamil
- Others

4. Which of these languages is the STRONGEST in Sarawak? Bidayuh

- Chinese Dialect
- English
- Iban
- Local Sarawak Malay
- Mandarin
- Melanau
- Standard Malay
- Tamil
- Others

E. SELF-DESCRIBED STATUS OF BIDAYUH AS A LANGUAGE OF WIDER COMMUNICATION

1. The Sarawak population is 2.6 million. In your opinion, how many people can speak Bidayuh in Sarawak now?

- Less than 250,000
- Between 250,000 and 500,000
- Between 500,000 and 1,000,000
- 1 - 2 million
- More than 2 million
- Don't know

2. Do you know any Bidayuh people who CANNOT speak Bidayuh?

- Every Bidayuh I know can speak Bidayuh
- I know less than 10 Bidayuh people who cannot speak Bidayuh.
- I know between 10 and 50 Bidayuh people who cannot speak Bidayuh.
- I know between 50 and 100 Bidayuh people who cannot speak Bidayuh.
- I know between 100 and 500 Bidayuh people who cannot speak Bidayuh.
- I know more than 500 Bidayuh people who cannot speak Bidayuh.

3. Do you any NON-Bidayuh people who are able to speak Bidayuh?
- None
 - I know less than 10 non-Bidayuh people who can speak Bidayuh.
 - I know between 10 and 50 non-Bidayuh people who can speak Bidayuh.
 - I know between 50 and 100 non-Bidayuh people who can speak Bidayuh.
 - I know between 100 and 500 non-Bidayuh people who can speak Bidayuh.
 - I know more than 500 non-Bidayuh people who can speak Bidayuh.

F. VIEWS ON EFFECTIVE WAYS TO PASS ON BIDAYUH LANGUAGE TO YOUNG PEOPLE

1. Have you read any of these materials in Bidayuh?
- Bidayuh dictionaries/word lists
 - Bidayuh story books
 - Bidayuh textbooks
 - Bidayuh magazines
 - Have not read any materials in Bidayuh
2. Have you listened to/watched any of these materials in Bidayuh?
- Bidayuh songs on Youtube
 - Bidayuh radio programmes
 - Bidayuh videos
 - Meetings conducted in Bidayuh language
 - Lessons teaching the Bidayuh language
 - Have not listened to/watched any materials in Bidayuh
3. In your opinion, which is the MOST effective way to pass on the Bidayuh language to young people?
- Have more community activities on Bidayuh culture and language
 - Print more books, magazines, story books, etc in Bidayuh
 - Increase radio programmes in Bidayuh
 - Have TV programmes in Bidayuh
 - Teach Bidayuh in school
 - Speak Bidayuh with family
 - Write social media messages in Bidayuh
4. Are you doing anything special to keep the Bidayuh language strong?

Thank you for your time and views!

Note: The questionnaire contains terms commonly used by the Bidayuh community for comprehensibility. Bukar-Sadung is spoken in Serian, Singgai-Jagoi in Bau, Salako-Rara in Lundu, Padawan-Sembaan in Padawan, and Biatah-Penrissen in Siburan.

Appendix 2: Open-ended responses in Bidayuh with translation in English

Bidayuh	Translation in English
<p>This response was in both Malay and Bidayuh: <i>Saya tulis novel di mana tajuknya adalah dalam bahasa Bidayuh. Dalam menulis novel, saya juga promote lagu-lagu Bidayuh, sedikit adat Bidayuh yang saya faham. Dalam novel juga saya selit perbualan dalam bahasa Bidayuh yang saya translatekan ke dalam BM. Setiap kali saya</i></p>	<p>Translated from Malay: I write novel where the title is in Bidayuh language. When writing the novel, I also promote Bidayuh songs, some Bidayuh customs that I understand. In the novel, I also insert conversations in Bidayuh that I translate to Malay. Every time, I advertise my novel, I use Bidayuh songs and insert a Youtube</p>

Bidayuh	Translation in English
<p><i>iklankan novel saya, saya akan guna lagu Bidayuh & selitkan link youtube lagu tersebut supaya pembaca saya turut menonton lagu tersebut. Dalam masa yang sama, saya automatik promote lagu-lagu dalam bahasa Bidayuh.</i></p> <p><i>Noh jek leh. Pa sinda bidoyoh dak pakai kuk noh sinda sok kupuak smobak. Idoh yoh samah in sinda bibau bonar, pa bidoyoh geh kowok er. Noh jek leh.</i></p>	<p>link to the song so that my readers will also watch the song. At the same time, I automatically promote the songs in Bidayuh language.</p> <p>Translated from Bidayuh: That's all. But the Bidayuh language that I use is from Semeba village. It is not the same as the 'original' or other Bidayuh Bau language, although it is still a Bidayuh language. That is all.</p>
<p>Kekalkan bangsa adat tak diang kudu sewak akan datang supaya anak sungkuh tak dpud miyu diang bidayuh.</p>	<p>Translated from Bidayuh: Preserve (our) ethnic identity (race) and culture for the future so that our children and grandchildren can speak in the Bidayuh language.</p>
<p>Ngajar bara nak sukuh tak manyu bidayuh , doh dak bahsa bara tak menyap . Begok ndei srita nga ragu diyang bahsa bdayuh smadi nga narik minat bara mesia dak dengah ayuo brajar bahsa ta</p>	<p>Translated from Bidayuh: Teach our children and grandchildren to speak Bidayuh, do not let our language disappear (be lost). Write more stories and songs in the Bidayuh language to create the people's interest to listen to and to learn our language.</p>
<p>Doh remah</p>	<p>Translated from Bidayuh: Do not falter (be weak? be discouraged).</p>
<p>Suba suba sinda Bidoyoh duoh nyaa dak nak er Bidoyoh..kai odak yoh suba blajar sinda</p>	<p>Translated from Bidayuh: Try to speak Bidayuh to people who have Bidayuh children...and ask them to try to learn to speak the language</p>