SIGEH ELT: Journal of Literature and Linguistics
Volume 6 Number 1, March 2026, pp: 909-918
E-ISSN: 2775-8834

People and Language: Maintenance And Sustainability of Ibanag in Makati City

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Article Info

Submitted:
26 June 2026
Reviewed:
26 July 2026 – 4 September 2026
Accepted:
4 September 2026
Published:
24 September 2026

Keywords:
Ibanag; language maintenance; family language policy; ethnolinguistic vitality; urbanization

Abstract

Urbanization intensifies the pressure on minority languages because dominant languages often regulate schooling, work, mobility, and public interaction. This qualitative case study examined how a 10-member multigenerational Ibanag-speaking family in Makati City maintains and sustains the Ibanag language amid the strong presence of Filipino and English in an urban setting. Guided by sociocultural theory, ethnolinguistic vitality theory, and family language policy, the study drew on semi-structured interviews, small-group conversations, participant observation, field notes, and family-based narrative reflections. Thematic analysis generated four major findings: parents and elders function as primary agents of intergenerational language transmission through home conversations, correction, reminders, and storytelling; daily routines such as meals, household activities, religious practices, and family gatherings provide natural spaces for Ibanag use; urban pressures from schooling, peer interaction, public communication, and language stigma restrict Ibanag use outside the home; and family members respond through deliberate home-domain language practice, community participation, cultural memory work, and positive identity affirmation. The study shows that language sustainability in an urban environment depends on the interaction of family commitment, community networks, and institutional support. Prior accounts often frame urbanization as uniformly eroding minority languages; this study shows instead that urbanization produces domain-specific shift, with the home and family functioning as a resilient high-vitality domain that buffers Ibanag from decline. This understanding adds a Philippine perspective to global scholarship on language maintenance, while providing actionable guidance for families, educators, local government units, and cultural organizations working to safeguard urban linguistic heritage.

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.36269/sigeh.v6i2.5486
Published by Universitas Muhammadiyah Lampung
Journal Homepage: https://journal.uml.ac.id/index.php/ELt/index
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INTRODUCTION

Language maintenance remains a central concern in multilingual societies because minority languages often compete with dominant languages that control schooling, employment, public services, media, and social mobility. Language shift occurs when one language gradually replaces another as the ordinary medium of communication across major life domains. In contrast, language maintenance refers to the continued use of a heritage or community language despite competition from a socially stronger language (Pauwels, 2016). In urban settings, language maintenance becomes more complex because families encounter multiple language demands each day.

The Philippine linguistic situation reflects both richness and vulnerabilityMany communities continue to carry local and ancestral languages, yet urban migration and the prestige of Filipino and

English influence everyday communication (Oliman et al., 2026). Internal migrants maintain heritage languages primarily within family and private settings, while shifting to Tagalog and English in public, educational, and workplace domains, where these languages carry institutional and economic prestige Makati City represents a highly urbanized space where educational, economic, and social transactions frequently privilege Filipino and English. For Ibanag-speaking families living in such an environment, the home becomes a critical site where language continuity is negotiated, protected, and renewed.

The Ibanag are an ethnolinguistic minority group native to Cagayan and Isabela in the northeastern region of Luzon, Philippines. Speaking Ibanag, a member of the Malayo-Polynesian branch of the Austronesian language family, the group historically held significant regional influence, with their language serving as a lingua franca throughout the Cagayan Valley. Over the years, however, economic pressures and job opportunities have driven many Ibanag families away from these traditional agricultural roots and into major urban centers like Metro Manila. In these fast-paced metropolitan environments, families face heavy pressure to adapt, often shifting to Tagalog and English for work, school, and daily social life. As a result, fewer children are learning the language at home, making Ibanag increasingly vulnerable to rapid domain loss. Examining how migrant families navigate these language shifts in urban settings is crucial for understanding how minority heritage languages can be preserved in modern contexts.

Previous research highlights family and community as primary strongholds for minority language maintenance, functioning not merely as preference-driven choices but as structured family practices, beliefs, and management strategies. Across diverse contexts, private and communal spaces allow for spontaneous communication, promote intergenerational cohesion, and make heritage language development visible to parents and elders (Nguyen & Hamid, 2021; Ong, 2021). Furthermore, Rahmat (2025) demonstrates that minority languages retain rich, localized semantic domains within intimate domestic interactions, helping buffer the home code from immediate external erosion.

However, urban migration and broader societal exposure introduce major structural shifts to these maintainive environments. As speakers navigate metropolitan centers, peer networks, formal education, and mainstream society increasingly encroach upon traditional heritage domains, giving rise to rapid domain reduction and language shift among younger generations – even when parental attitudes toward the heritage language remain positive (Nguyen & Hamid, 2021; Setiawan, 2020).

At the same time, the ancestral language serves as a crucial locus for identity and cultural continuity, particularly within displaced or urbanized populations where language use in family, emotional, and spiritual life sustains memory, belonging, and cultural preservation (Ameen & Magirovskaya, 2020; Setiawan, 2020). Building upon this link between language and identity, Syaputri et al. (2021) demonstrate that as speakers navigate dominant language environments, preserving indigenous linguistic structures and native cultural understanding acts as a vital foundation for sustaining identity against surrounding sociolinguistic pressures.

Nevertheless, these studies leave unresolved how the tension between domain reduction and cultural continuity interacts within multigenerational Ibanag families navigating highly urbanized Philippine settings like Makati City.

Although language maintenance has been studied in several diasporic, migrant, and minority contexts, localized Philippine urban cases remain underrepresented. The experiences of Ibanag-speaking families in Metro Manila require closer attention because urbanization does not automatically erase ethnic language use. Some families continue to maintain ancestral languages

through ordinary practices rather than formal language programs. The present study addresses this gap by examining the practices, principles, and lifestyle patterns that help a multigenerational Ibanag family sustain Ibanag in Makati City.

Minority language sustainability in urban areas is shaped by family interaction, community belonging, school language policy, peer communication, economic participation, and public attitudes toward linguistic difference. For Ibanag speakers in Makati City, the daily need to use Filipino and English creates conditions that encourage language shift, especially among younger family members. At the same time, family routines, elders' language authority, storytelling, and cultural participation create opportunities for Ibanag maintenance.

This study investigated how a multigenerational Ibanag-speaking family in Makati City maintains and sustains the Ibanag language amid urban pressures. The central problem concerns the relationship between home-based practices and wider urban conditions: how family members preserve Ibanag in private and community spaces while navigating public environments dominated by Filipino and English. Based on the aforementioned analysis, the following research questions were established:

1. What family practices and lifestyle patterns help sustain the use of Ibanag in Makati City?
2. How do parents, elders, and younger family members contribute to the transmission and preservation of Ibanag?
3. What urban pressures affect Ibanag language maintenance, and how does the family respond to these pressures?
4. What family-based, community-based, and institutional actions strengthen minority language maintenance in an urban environment?

METHOD

Research Design

The study used a qualitative single-case design with a narrative orientation. A single-case design was appropriate because the study focused on one multigenerational Ibanag-speaking family situated in Makati City. The narrative orientation allowed the researcher to examine lived experiences, family memories, and everyday accounts of language use (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). This design prioritizes depth, context, and meaning rather than statistical generalization, offering rich insight into personal perspectives instead of broad population claims.

The case was bounded by family membership, Ibanag language background, and residence in Makati City. This boundary allowed close examination of how language maintenance operates within a family located in a multilingual urban environment.

Participants

Participants consisted of ten members of a multigenerational Ibanag family residing in Makati City. The family included two grandparents, two parents, four children of varying ages, one aunt, and one cousin. This composition provided access to intergenerational perspectives on language use, language transmission, and cultural practice.

Purposive sampling guided participant selection. The family was selected because members had direct experience using Ibanag in the home while participating in an urban environment where Filipino and English are dominant. As the primary arena of heritage language socialization, the family offers a critical vantage point for understanding how minority languages persist amid dominant-language pressures (Curdt-Christiansen & Palviainen, 2023). The family structure also provided a suitable context for examining the roles of elders, parents, and younger members in

language maintenance, since intergenerational dynamics and differing age-group practices are central to understanding how language transmission succeeds or falters (Hollebeke et al., 2024).

Research Instruments

The study used a semi-structured interview guide, a small-group discussion guide, an observation protocol, and field-note templates. Combining interviews, group discussions, observations, and field notes enables methodological triangulation, strengthening credibility by cross-verifying self-reported accounts against actual language behavior in context (Denzin, 2012). Interview questions focused on language use at home, language choices outside the home, storytelling practices, intergenerational communication, cultural events, attitudes toward Ibanag, perceived stigma, and support needed for language preservation. Carefully designed interview guides and targeted questions ensure systematic coverage while remaining sensitive to participants' lived experiences (Curdt-Christiansen, 2018). The observation protocol focused on naturally occurring language practices during family interaction and cultural activities. Field notes recorded setting, participants, language used, interaction patterns, nonverbal cues, and researcher reflections.

Data Collection Procedure

Data were gathered through individual interviews, small-group conversations, participant observation, field notes, and family-based narrative reflections. Combining interviews, group discussions, and observations represents a triangulated approach that strengthens credibility by cross-verifying personal accounts against actual language practices (Noble & Heale, 2019). Individual interviews allowed participants to describe personal language experiences, while small-group conversations elicited shared family perspectives. Participant observation documented language use in ordinary family situations, where reported practices may differ from observed behavior—a distinction central to rigorous family language policy research.

Interviews were audio-recorded with consent. Ibanag responses were translated into English for analysis while preserving culturally specific meanings where needed. Transcripts, field notes, and reflective journal entries were organized by data source and date before coding.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed through thematic analysis following the procedures of familiarization, initial coding, theme development, theme review, theme definition, and report writing (Braun & Clarke, 2006). First, transcripts and notes were read several times to identify recurring ideas. Second, initial codes were assigned to meaningful segments of data. Third, related codes were grouped into broader themes connected to the research questions.

Coding was both deductive and inductive. Deductive coding used concepts from sociocultural theory, ethnolinguistic vitality, and family language policy. Inductive coding allowed themes to emerge from participant accounts. The coding process followed an iterative approach in which categories were revised as new patterns became visible (Saldaña, 2016).

Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations

Trustworthiness was strengthened through data triangulation, member checking, thick description, and an audit trail. Triangulation, achieved by comparing interviews, small-group conversations, observations, and field notes, corroborates findings across multiple sources and methods, thereby enhancing credibility. Member checking allowed participants to confirm whether interpretations reflected intended meanings. Thick description supported contextual interpretation, while the audit trail recorded coding decisions and theme revisions. Ethical procedures included informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality, and respect for cultural sensitivity.

Participant names were not used in the presentation of findings. Quotations were edited lightly for clarity without changing meaning.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

The analysis generated four major themes: family as the primary site of intergenerational transmission, everyday routines as maintenance spaces, urban pressure and selective language shift, and adaptive strategies for Ibanag sustainability. These themes show that Ibanag maintenance in Makati City is not produced by one factor alone. It emerges from the interaction of family authority, emotional attachment, routine practice, community connection, and resistance to language stigma.

Table 1. Summary of Emergent Themes

Theme	Representative Evidence	Interpretive Point
Family transmission	Parents and elders remind children to speak Ibanag at home.	Maintenance begins in close intergenerational relationships.
Everyday routines	Meals, household chores, religious practices, and family conversations include Ibanag.	Ordinary use keeps the language functional.
Urban pressure	Filipino and English dominate schooling, public spaces, and peer interaction.	Dominant languages reduce public domains for Ibanag.
Adaptive strategies	Storytelling, daily dialogue, gatherings, and identity affirmation support continuity.	Sustainability requires deliberate practice and supportive networks.

Theme 1: Family as the Primary Site of Intergenerational Transmission

The first theme highlights the role of parents and elders as primary agents of Ibanag language transmission. The family's home domain functions as the most stable space for Ibanag use because members share close relationships, repeated interaction, and a common cultural history. One participant stated, "Our parents always remind us to speak Ibanag at home because keeping our language alive is important, even if we use Filipino or English outside." This statement shows that family reminders operate as a language management strategy.

Elders also transmit Ibanag through storytelling. A participant shared, "Grandmother told us stories in Ibanag. These stories are sometimes about their lives." Storytelling does more than teach vocabulary. It links language with memory, ancestry, and cultural values.

The results suggest that intergenerational transmission is strongest when Ibanag is not framed as a school subject or occasional performance. The language is sustained when family members use it to give instructions, share memories, express affection, correct behavior, and participate in ordinary conversation.

Theme 2: Everyday Routines as Maintenance Spaces

The second theme shows that daily routines provide natural and repeated spaces for Ibanag use. Family members reported using Ibanag during meals, household chores, religious activities, family visits, and casual conversations. These situations matter because maintenance requires

regular use across ordinary domains. A language restricted only to festivals or formal cultural events risks becoming symbolic rather than communicative.

Participant accounts show that Ibanag remains meaningful because it appears in the routine flow of family life. The use of Ibanag during practical activities allows children and younger relatives to connect words with tasks, emotions, and relationships. Such use turns language into a living resource instead of a heritage object remembered only during special occasions.

In the present case, the home domain serves as the foundation. Community and cultural events expand the language beyond the household and allow younger members to hear Ibanag from other speakers.

Theme 3: Urban Pressure and Selective Language Shift

The third theme concerns the pressure of the urban environment. Participants explained that Filipino and English dominate school, work, public communication, and peer interaction. One family member stated, “We often have to use Filipino or English when we are out in the city. It is hard to keep speaking Ibanag all the time.” This response illustrates selective language shift: Ibanag remains strong in the home, while dominant languages regulate most public domains.

Language stigma also affects Ibanag use. One participant shared, “Sometimes people make fun of us for speaking Ibanag. It can be discouraging, especially for the younger ones.” Stigma weakens perceived vitality because younger speakers become more cautious in public. Urban multilingualism does not remove the ancestral language immediately. Instead, it reduces its public domains while leaving the family domain as the strongest base of continuity.

Theme 4: Adaptive Strategies for Ibanag Sustainability

The fourth theme identifies family strategies used to sustain Ibanag despite urban pressure. The most visible strategy is regular dialogue in Ibanag. One participant explained, “We talk about what happened to us at school or work in Ibanag. Sharing our daily lives and activities in the language keeps it alive and relevant.” This practice is important because it connects Ibanag with current experiences instead of limiting it to the past.

Community participation also supports sustainability. A family member noted, “Community gatherings and festivals are a great way to connect with others who speak Ibanag. It feels good to be part of something bigger.” Such events reinforce positive language identity and counter isolation. Community participation expands the language ecology by giving family members access to speakers beyond the household.

The strategies found in the study reflect three observable patterns in family language practice. Practice appears in daily Ibanag conversations. Belief appears in the view that Ibanag represents family identity and cultural pride. Management appears in elders’ reminders, storytelling, corrections, and deliberate family decisions to keep Ibanag active. These strategies show that family-led maintenance works best when supported by community recognition and institutional encouragement.

Discussion

This study found that Ibanag language maintenance in Makati City is anchored in family practice. Parents and elders function as central transmitters of language through reminders, storytelling, correction, and daily interaction. Younger family members learn Ibanag most effectively when the language is attached to ordinary life and not limited to ceremonial use. This indicates that heritage language continuity depends primarily on consistent domestic engagement rather than occasional formal teaching or cultural performance. The findings also show that urban

pressure leads to selective language shift. Filipino and English dominate schooling, work, and public interaction, while Ibanag remains strongest in the home and cultural community.

This division of domains explains why the language remains alive but vulnerable. The family's commitment slows shift, yet broader support is needed to strengthen language vitality outside the household. Finally, the study found that language maintenance is both linguistic and cultural. Ibanag is sustained not only through words and grammar, but through stories, respect for elders, family memory, participation in gatherings, and the belief that the language carries identity. Sustainability depends on maintaining these connections across generations. These patterns collectively answer the core research question by showing that Ibanag persistence in an urban environment emerges from the interplay of family practice, domain separation, and cultural attachment rather than from any single factor alone.

The central role of parents and elders observed in this study aligns with existing research showing that grandparents and older relatives play a particularly significant role in mother tongue maintenance (Ameen & Magirovskaya, 2020). Family language policy scholarship similarly identifies parental and elder decisions, reminders, and corrective practices as central to children's language socialization and learning (Ong, 2021). The finding that routine domestic activity supports effective language use also reinforces earlier work which emphasizes that family and community domains enrich understanding of language maintenance and shift (Nguyen & Hamid, 2021).
When language is integrated into daily life instead of restricted to special events it remains a living resource rather than becoming a symbolic relic. The observed pattern of selective domain shift further resembles accounts from other metropolitan contexts where the national language expands in public spheres while the minority language retreats into family and private use (Setiawan, 2020). Consistent with those studies, the Makati case demonstrates that urbanization does not necessarily produce immediate language loss. Instead it reorganizes the distribution of language use across domains and leaves the family as the primary sanctuary of continuity.

These findings can be interpreted through ethnolinguistic vitality theory which explains how status factors influence language use across different. The dominance of Filipino and English in education, employment, and public life reflects their higher institutional status which restricts Ibanag to domestic and cultural spaces. When a language is perceived as having low status outside the home speakers become more reluctant to use it publicly especially younger members. This status imbalance creates the observed division of domains. At the same time the family functions as a resilient high-vitality domain where shared identity, intergenerational bonds, and cultural practice compensate for external disadvantage. The results also correspond with the three core components of family language policy which are practice, ideology, and management (Bilgory-Fazakas & Armon-Lotem, 2025).

The belief that Ibanag embodies family identity and cultural pride represents ideology. Elders' reminders, corrections, and deliberate decisions constitute management. The study therefore supports and refines existing theoretical assumptions by showing that family-led maintenance is most effective when all three components operate together. It further demonstrates that urban minority language sustainability depends not on isolated household action alone but on the interaction of family commitment, community cohesion, and broader institutional support.

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that the maintenance and sustainability of Ibanag in Makati City are shaped by the combined influence of family commitment, intergenerational transmission, cultural

routines, community participation, and urban language pressures. The family remains the strongest domain of Ibanag use because it provides repeated interaction, emotional attachment, and cultural authority. Parents and elders keep the language active by using it in ordinary communication, storytelling, and family guidance.

Urbanization creates real challenges because Filipino and English dominate the public spaces that structure education, work, peer communication, and mobility. These pressures do not automatically eliminate Ibanag, but such pressures narrow its domains of use. The result is a fragile form of sustainability in which the language survives through family practice but requires stronger community and institutional support to remain visible and valued.

The study contributes to minority language research by presenting a localized Philippine case of language maintenance in an urban environment. It shows that linguistic heritage survives when families treat the ancestral language as useful, emotionally meaningful, and socially valued. It also affirms that urban development and language preservation need not be opposing forces when families, communities, schools, and local government units work together to protect linguistic diversity.

To sustain and revitalize the Ibanag language, families should consistently use it in daily life, including meals, conversations, storytelling, prayers, and gatherings, to build fluency and keep it rooted in routine. Communities should foster intergenerational engagement through shared cultural activities such as storytelling, songs, oral histories, games, and demonstrations, creating natural spaces for practice and continuity. Local government can support linguistic heritage through public recognition, cultural events, documentation projects, and partnerships with families, schools, and cultural groups to develop accessible learning resources and exhibits. Schools and educators should affirm linguistic diversity by valuing home languages in presentations, literacy projects, and classroom policies, reducing stigma and strengthening student belonging. Finally, researchers and linguists should expand documentation and cross-community studies of Ibanag vocabulary, narratives, and usage, making findings widely available to support ongoing language maintenance.

Acknowledgments

The author gratefully acknowledges the editors and reviewers of SIGEH ELT: Journal of Literature and Linguistics for their valuable comments, constructive feedback, and scholarly guidance, which contributed significantly to the improvement of this manuscript. The author also extends sincere appreciation to friends and colleagues at the University of Makati for their encouragement, support, and collegial assistance throughout the conduct and completion of this research.

Credit Author

Cristopher Alvin M. De Guzman: Conceptualization, Methodology, Validation, Data Gathering, Formal Analysis, Writing – Original Draft, Writing – Review & Editing.

Funding

This research was independently conducted and was fully self-funded by the author. No external financial support, grant, or institutional funding was received for the conduct, analysis, or publication of this study.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there are no known financial, professional, or personal interests that could be perceived as influencing the conduct, analysis, interpretation, or presentation of the research reported in this manuscript.

Use of Artificial Intelligence

The author used Claude to assist in the finalization and refinement of the themes. Mendeley was used to organize citations and manage reference entries. AI-assisted outputs were treated solely as supplementary research and writing support and were critically evaluated, verified, and revised by the author. The author retained full responsibility for the accuracy and integrity of the data, analysis, interpretation, conclusions, and final content of the manuscript.

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