



## **YO SI PUEDO: A CUBAN LITERACY PROGRAM TO STRENGTHEN LITERACY LEVEL IN WEST PAPUA, INDONESIA**

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### **Abstract**

Illiteracy remains a serious problem in West Papua, Indonesia. The data from Indonesian Central Bureau of Statistics (BPS) show nearly 30 percent of Indigenous Papuans aged between 15 to 45 are illiterate (BPS, 2016). The number is far higher than the national average which is only 3.5 percent (BPS, 2016). In response to the problem, the article aims to provide a brief picture of causes and effects behind the high illiteracy rate in West Papua and to recommend a relevant solution for the problem. The methodology undertaken in this article is a literature review. Relevant literatures are obtained through peer-reviewed articles from reliable journals and any other relevant sources. The results reveal three main factors that contribute to the low literacy level in West Papua; geographical challenges, low human resources and diverse vernacular languages. Due to the high illiterate percentage, Papuan community has been experiencing serious health issue, poverty, poor educational access and low social cohesion. The article also proposes a so-called Yo Si Puedo (YSP) as an alternative non-formal literacy program to strengthen basic literacy in West Papua. It is because YSP can be highly adaptable to the Papuan context in terms of language, culture and social reality.

**Keywords:** Illiteracy, West Papua, Yo Si Pedro (YSP), Video-Based learning, Alphanumeric technique

### **Introduction**

One day in 2013, in the first week of my volunteering program in the rural area of West Papua, I asked one of my students to read my name that I had written on the whiteboard. Even though I helped him to spell the words, he kept silent instead and did not say any word. I then realised he was one of the among 80 percent of early grade students having very low literacy skill (UNICEF, 2016). I did not blame him at all. I was just wondering that there should be something needs to be done immediately to help them away from the illiteracy cycle.

The story above is the writer's personal experience while being a teacher volunteer in the rural area of West Papua. Such experience had also been shared by my colleagues, who taught in other schools in West Papua, including a story of many high school students and indigenous adult Papuans who are still illiterate and have limited reading comprehension.

In this essay, I will refer to basic literacy as an individual's ability in both reading and writing in simple words for daily life. Otherwise, illiteracy is an inability to write and read even in simple sentence (UNESCO, 2005).

Three factors considerably contribute to the low literacy level in Papua and West Papua. The first is inadequate human resources including lack support from government as well as local community, teachers with low qualification and teacher absenteeism. For instance, roughly 34 percent of teachers in Papua and West Papua are absent at school when they are ought to be there (McKenzie et al., 2014). The second is diverse vernacular languages. The land of Papua has more than 260 local languages and they are commonly uttered as mother languages (Ross, 2005). The last is geographical challenges in which many isolated highlands in Papua and West Papua are difficult to reach because they are surrounded by virgin rainforest (Mollet, 2007).

This condition, therefore, has a myriad of impacts to the significant disparities in many aspects of life. For instance, Indonesia Ministry of Education and Culture (2012) reports that illiteracy and poverty are closely connected at all levels meaning that the regions with the highest illiteracy rate generally have the lowest GDP per capita, poor economy, health, and education. As a result, Papua ranked at the lowest rate of Human Development Index (HDI), compared to other provinces in Indonesia (Sofilda, Hamzah, & Sholeh, 2014).

This essay, therefore, would investigate more deeply the causes and effects of high illiteracy rate and carefully examine the possible solution to strengthen literacy level in West Papua. One solution suggested by Boughton (2014) is *Yo Sí Puedo* (YSP) strategy which was originally developed by Cuban educator Dr. [Leonela Relys Diaz](#). This method has been adopted by more than 20 developed countries and successfully helping around 8 million non-literate people to enhance their basic literacy (Boughton, 2014). Therefore, I would be enthusiastic to scrutinise whether the method can be relevantly adapted to the Papuan context. In this article, I would like to argue that YSP method can be an effective literacy teaching method to raise literacy level in West Papua. The investigation would be significant viewpoint for indigenous Papuans, central and local government, Community Learning Centre (CLC), educational practitioners or to those who are concerned about illiteracy issue in the land of Papuan.

Hence, the research questions are provided below as a guideline to meet the main goals of this article.

1. What are the primary causes of illiteracy in West Papua?
2. How does high illiteracy rate affect indigenous Papuan community?
3. How can YSP method be effective to raise literacy level in West Papua?

As stated above, the essential focus of this article is to examine whether YSP is applicable in improving literacy level in West Papua. But, in order to know the fundamental problems behind the high percentage of illiteracy in West Papua, a

brief picture of the present situation in term of high illiteracy rate in Papua would be discussed firstly at the beginning of this investigation. The second part is the discussion of casual factors of illiteracy and its implications for indigenous Papuans and their communities. Analysing possible solutions using YSP method to overcome high illiteracy rate in the land of Papuan is briefly presented in the last part of this essay.

## **Method**

The methodology undertaken in this article is a literature review. Relevant literature was obtained through peer-reviewed articles from reliable journals and literacy data from Indonesian central bureau of statistic (BPS). However, due to the lack of literacy study in West Papua, some online newspapers, UNESCO website, and reliable blogs would be taken as secondary resources to support this investigation. Thus, synthesising those literature, which is an essential part of this article, is carried out to frame and build the important arguments.

## **Findings and Discussion**

### ***Current situation of Illiteracy in West Papua***

The land of New Guinea is the second largest island in the world after Greenland, comprising two distinct nations. The eastern part is the country of Papua New Guinea. West Papua, which is part of Indonesia, is in the western part of island. However, this essay will discuss the latter only that is West Papua. West Papua was split into two provinces in 2003; West Irian Jaya and Irian Jaya (later renamed West Papua and Papua in 2007). Thus, there is no difference between the two regions because they share social-cultural similarities. In this essay, I am referring to the two regions using the name of West Papua as it is well-known in the world.

Illiteracy is endemic to the land of Papuan. The data from Indonesian Central Bureau of Statistics (BPS) in 2016 show that nearly 30 percent of Indigenous Papuans aged between 15 to 45 are illiterate (BPS, 2016). This number, compared to the other provinces, brings West Papua to the highest percentage of illiteracy in Indonesia. Interestingly, not only does the high rate of illiteracy come from out-of-school children and the youth but it is also from the students studying at primary and junior high school level (Yektiningtyas-Modouw & Karna, 2013). The percentage would be much higher among the population living in highlands, the most difficult places for government and non-government literacy programs to reach (Yektiningtyas & Karna, 2013). Due to geographical challenges, the discrepancy in illiteracy rate of 15 years old group and above between rural and urban areas in Papua is also higher (Jalal & Sardjunani, 2006). The condition, therefore, needs immediate differentiated attention to address illiterate adult population. Such program is not only relying on formal education but also non-formal education.

In national level, the central government has already attempted several endeavours to eradicate illiteracy in Indonesia. As a result of Government's work in increasing literacy level through two main literacy programs; Pendidikan Keaksaraan Fungsional (Functional Literacy Program) and Pendidikan Keaksaraan Usaha Mandiri (Entrepreneurship Literacy Program), Indonesia received a prestigious award from UNESCO in 2012 namely The King Sejong

Literacy Prize (UNESCO, 2013). Indonesia has succeeded to diminish the percentage of illiterate people aged 15 and above from 14,84 in 1994 to 4,62 in 2016 (BPS, 2016). During the period, nevertheless, the illiteracy rate in West Papua remains high. Some primary factors contribute to this issue, which would be discussed in the following paragraphs.

### ***Causal Problems of high illiteracy rate***

The first problem of high illiteracy rate in West Papua is geographical challenges. West Papua is categorised as a mountainous island in which many isolated lowlands and highlands are difficult to reach because they are surrounded by virgin rainforest. Some upland districts are unapproachable except using an aircraft, and it is extortionately expensive (Irawan, 2014). Additionally, many indigenous Papuans prefer to live in the rural area because of comfortable living and working preference such as hunting, fishing as well as cultivating Sago (Papuan's traditional food). Nevertheless, only well-educated Papuans and middle class of Papuan commonly live in the city like Jayapura, Sorong and Manokwari. Under this condition combined with lack infrastructures, indigenous Papuan community has had a difficulty to access better education because they are extremely isolated from outside, and some highlands are even unreachable.

Consequently, this unfortunate geographic condition leads to the low accessibility of education at all aspects such as school buildings, availability of teachers, learning resources, and teacher absenteeism. Let me take the latter as an example. Many of civil servant teachers are reluctant to teach and live in rural areas because of poor infrastructure such as road, the house of teacher as well as small salary (Ha, 2016). A study conducted by UNCEN, SMERU and UNICEF (2012) on teacher absenteeism in West Papua concludes that the more isolated school location is, the higher the percentage of teacher absenteeism would be. The rate would constitute 50 percent at the hard-to-access highland and lowland districts meaning that 1 out of 2 teachers is absent at school in long-term period. This condition contributes to the high percentage of student dropout, which is the primary cause of low literacy skill for many school-age children (UNCEN et al., 2012)

The conflict between Bahasa Indonesia as a compulsory educational language and diverse vernacular languages in West Papua also contributes to the low literacy skill. The land of Papuan has approximately 260 local languages and many of them are spoken as mother language by diverse small groups of indigenous Papua (Grimes, 2000; Wurnm, 2001 as cited in Aikhenvald & Stebbins, 2007). Many adult Papuans have no ability to speak Bahasa Indonesia. As a result, they very often use their own local language to communicate one another in everyday life. The main problem is that Bahasa Indonesia is an official language in Indonesia for formal occasions, including educational purpose (Nuryanto, 2015). In other words, Bahasa Indonesia must be used a language of instruction in formal education as well as non-formal education like literacy programs. Consequently, learning materials, books, and language used in literacy training do not reflect the indigenous language and cultural context. Learners would fell aliened from learning activity, and it can hinder them to acquire basic literacy skill (Yektiningtyas & Karna, 2013).

High Illiteracy rate in West Papua can also be caused by a hereditary effect. If illiteracy is not promptly eradicated in a family, it would be descendant through generations. The children who have illiterate parents are vulnerable to be illiterate as well because they have limited opportunity to learn basic literacy at home since their family environment is unable to support their basic literacy development (Martínez, R., & Fernández, A., 2010). Additionally, Papuan parents with low literacy skill have poor attention to education and even do not allow their children going to school. I had experienced this case few times when I was teaching at one of school in West Papua, a parent coming to class and forcedly picking up his child was ubiquitous to see. Papuan parents have a tendency to believe that it is better for children not to go to school because it is just the same, in the end, knowing to read and write will help nothing to their family.

### ***The effects of Illiteracy in West Papua***

Accordingly, high Illiteracy rate has greater negative impacts in many aspects of Papuans' life such as low social cohesion, poverty, health and education. These affect not only on individuals' life but also their communities.

Firstly, UNESCO (2006) reports illiteracy has a negative effect on human health in term of hygiene, nutrition and preventive action and treatment due to the fact that illiterate people have limited ability to comprehend messages, prescription, health instructions, and self-care knowledge (UNESCO, 2006). In fact, it is unsurprising that West Papua encounters serious health problems compared to other provinces in Indonesia. For instance, it suffers HIV/AIDS fifteen times higher than the national percentage (Butt, Numbery, Sos, Morin, & Kes, 2002; Cheema, 2014), most malaria-endemic region in Indonesia, (Hanandita & Tampubolon, 2016) and highest maternal and infant mortality (Cheema, 2014; Marthias & Trisnantoro, 2012)

Secondly, Illiteracy and poverty have a reciprocal connection. A study conducted by Jalal and Sardjunani (2006) reveals that there is a positive correlation between adult low literacy level and poverty in Indonesia. They argue that the higher illiteracy rate of the region is, the poorer economically the region would be. The same goes for the opposite. This is supported by a national survey data from BPS in 2010 that announced West Papua as the highest rate of illiteracy and poverty province, nearly 37 percent and around 35 percent respectively. This poverty rate is roughly three times higher than national average which is only 11 percent (BPS, 2010). One of the factors is illiterate indigenous Papuans experience serious unemployability issue; they face many difficulties to find better jobs because they have no expertise and low level of knowledge to compete with non-indigenous workers.

Thirdly, UNESCO (2006) also argues that illiterate persons have low social integration and cohesion because they are vulnerable to endure low self-esteem, self-autonomy and critical thinking. Consequently, due to high illiteracy rate in West Papua, it is not exaggerated to say that indigenous Papuans have become a marginalised and even oppressed community in their own land (Scott & Tebay, 2005).

***Yo Si Puedo (YSP) Literacy Program as an alternative way to help the illiteracy issue in West Papua***

YSP was originally developed by Cuban educator Dr Leonela Relys Diaz. Even though there is a long debate among scholars about who inspired who, but YPS and Freirean literacy approach share many similarities, especially when it comes to the philosophy of pedagogy. Principally, there are two phases of YSP implementation. The first is socialisation and mobilisation. According to Boughton et al. (2013), the main purpose of this phase is to draw the public and community attention that illiteracy is not only an individual problem but more than that, it is a social problem that should be seriously put into action. This problem must get a serious attention that whole elements of the community should take part in action. The socialisation begins in local communities, in particular to the given areas that have many illiterate indigenous Papuans. Most importantly, to convince individuals who have a strong power to influence people such as tribal chiefs, religious leaders, and village chiefs. The message about the power of literacy for a better life should be convincingly transferred into the whole community so that they are willingly motivated to get involved and take responsibility in this program as a learner, teachers, supporters, or even organisers (Boughton, et al, 2013). The second phase of YSP program is the implementation of literacy class that comprises a range of basic literacy lessons delivered through recorded lessons on video monitored by local facilitators.

Furthermore, several benefits of YSP literacy program YSP will be discussed in this essay. The first is due to its flexibility, YSP can be highly adapted and contextualised to different languages, cultures and social realities. Second, video-based literacy class and alphanumeric technique also can effectively assist the learners to acquire basic literacy skill.

***Contextualising***

The first benefit of utilising YPS in literacy training in West Papua is that this method is contextualised to meet what the learner's needs and condition. For example, the use of local language as the language of instruction which enables learners to engage in the learning process effectively. Referring to Freire's literacy method, it is important to fully understand the cultural and language context of targeted community. Therefore, in YSP program, a brief investigation to identify local culture and language is needed by checking Papuan's perceptions and investigating the common vocabulary used by the community in their daily life. It is essential part because the words being taught in the literacy class should come from the local language that reflects current conditions and hopes (Brown, 1974). Moreover, Yektiningtyas-Modouw & Karna (2013) also emphasises this part by criticising formal education and literacy program conducted by the government in West Papua. They argue that literacy learning materials that do not reflect local-context Papuan is the significant factor to demotivate learners to learn basic literacy. Hence, the recommendations of their study suggest that literacy training in West Papua should intensify using local words. It is in line with Freire's belief that literacy program is not merely about teaching an individual to read or write. Rather, it is a transformative process which should address critical awareness (Brown, 1974). Freire further insists that educators should not merely be the

source of knowledge, but it should be from the learners, and the process of learning itself, that confront social condition where the learners live, allowing learners to discuss the social problems surrounds them and understand the reality of life. Freire refers to this process as a dialogue between educator and learner (Brown, 1974). Furthermore, the dialogue can be meaningfully understood by learners if the language being spoken is understandable to them. Learners also can be easily engaged to participate in the literacy class.

However, the use of vernacular language as an instructional language in literacy training in Indonesia has received a critique from scholars. One of the purposes of national policy which regulates Bahasa Indonesia as an official educational language is to strengthen nationalism among language diversity (Paauw, 2009). It means that, as stated in Regulation No.4, 1950, Chapter IV, Bahasa Indonesia is a unity of language that should be used for educational purpose at all levels of education excluding kindergarten (Simanjuntak, 2009). Bahasa Indonesia, therefore, is hoped to unify among the 753 local languages uttered by diverse tribes in Indonesia (Paauw, 2009).

It is true that nationalism is an essential element to nourish national identity in a multicultural country like Indonesia. Nevertheless, it is important to note that helping the illiterate community is also a part of nationalism. Moreover, there is no enough evidence whether using local language can diminish nationalism (Simanjuntak, 2009). Otherwise, learning literacy would be significant if the instructional language used in the class is familiar for learners and spoken in the community for daily communication (UNESCO, 2013). Bahasa Indonesia can be further strengthened after learners can master basic literacy in their own native language.

### ***Video-Based Literacy Learning and Alphnumeric***

The second benefit of YSP method is the use of technology-based literacy learning in the literacy classroom and using an alphanumeric technique which can effectively help the learners to acquire basic literacy skill. According to Boughton (2014), the central element of YSP method is the combination of video-based learning and alphanumeric technique. A set of interconnected audio-visual lessons on DVD is provided to assist learners to follow the learning instruction. The local indigenous Papuans act as a facilitator to operate the electronic devices and guide the learners to complete the learning activity. Furthermore, the learners can watch each lesson on the videos which demonstrates a series of lessons with local words that are, as discussed previously, based on the local reality and reflecting positive messages in terms of social and economic issues. For example, the phrase of “Open the Gate” means to begin a new era of life with literacy skill. What is more, the words are broken down into syllables to lead the learners decode and associate the letters with the numbers in order to form new words. More importantly, the words displayed on the video will stimulate a discussion between the learners and facilitator. It is similar to Freirean literacy principles called “generative words” which are first codified into images and then problematised through a dialogical discussion before the written form of the word is introduced, broken into syllables and used to construct new words (Brown, 1974).

There are several ways why video-based literacy learning and alphanumeric advantage the learners to perceive the learning outcome. Firstly, literacy class lets the learners to participate actively in the learning process because the learners are simply engaged by audio-visual displayed on the videos (Fernandes, 2010). Additionally, moving images and sound on video enable the learners to acquire the positive messages of the lesson being taught easily (Fernandes, 2010). For instance, when the lesson is about the word “Health”, the video will stimulate the discussion between the local instructors and the learners how to live healthier in their daily life. In such manner, not only do the learners learn to read or write, but they also are encouraged to be active and aware of the oppressive conditions, deploying their basic literacy skill to cope with the social reality of life. This is what Freire highlights on his literacy philosophy that literacy must be linked with the social change of life by taking action against the oppression (Dyer & Choksi, 1998). Secondly, the use of alphanumeric technique is beneficial to the learners acquiring basic literacy due to the fact that the indigenous Papuans are more familiar with the numbers rather than the letters. Many indigenous Papuans are frequently involved with money and quantities in their everyday life, such as dealing with traditional market trade (Janur, 2017). According to Boughton et al (2013), the combination of the letters and the numbers is the key reason of successful YSP implementation in some countries because the illiterate learners easily decode and memorise the letters. For example, the numbers 1,2,3,4 and 5 are associated with the vowels a, e, I, o and u respectively whereas the consonants are associated with the frequent use of the numbers.

Nevertheless, a study undertaken by Fernandes (2010) on the significance of using YSP in Timor-Leste reveals several disadvantages in utilising YSP. He reports that using videos in YSP literacy class in the certain rural areas of Timor-Leste was not effective because it did rely on the availability of electricity. The equipment which need electricity such as computer, screen, and speaker, therefore, could not be turned on in some places because of no electricity supply. The alternative way to overcome this problem is to place YSP class in the schools located in every district of West Papua. Indonesian education ministry has an affirmative program to supply computers and electricity power supply like solar cell at remote-area schools of West Papua.

## **Conclusion**

From the discussion, it can be concluded that Illiteracy remains a serious problem in West Papua. Some detrimental conditions contribute to this case. The first problem of high illiteracy rate in West Papua is geographical challenges. This unfortunate geographic condition leads to the low accessibility of education at all aspects such as school buildings, availability of teachers, learning resources, and teacher absenteeism. The conflict between Bahasa Indonesia as a compulsory educational language and diverse vernacular languages in West Papua also contributes to the low literacy skill. Additionally, the high Illiteracy rate in West Papua can also be caused by a hereditary effect because if illiteracy is not promptly eradicated, it would be descendant through generations. Consequently, high Illiteracy rate has greater negative impacts in many aspects of Papuans' lives such as low social cohesion, poverty, health and education. These affect not only



on individuals' life but also their communities. Those issues need to be solved immediately. Therefore, this essay suggests the implementation of YSP literacy program in raising literacy level in West Papua. YSP is effective in large part because of its flexibility; it was designed to be highly adaptable to different languages, cultures and social realities.

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