

# Reflections on English and Native Languages in the Pacific

*We envision a world where all children and communities are literate and healthy—global participants grounded in and enriched by their cultures.*

~PREL Vision

The Pacific is a linguistically rich and diverse region, encompassing numerous indigenous languages with valuable oral traditions. Adding to this mix, English—an additional language for many students—is the medium of instruction in many primary and nearly all secondary schools. The benefits of learning another language are well-known and documented, and the benefits are presumed to be even greater when the language is English, a de facto international standard. However, too often, we have concentrated our resources on helping students learn English and assumed that the native language would “take care of itself.” Many of us have fretted over the burden this places on our children (learning in English while learning English) and the risk that it poses to indigenous languages.

More recently, research has shown that students perform better in another language when they have a solid base in their native language. Indeed, not only does proficiency in the native language promote proficiency in additional languages (like English), but proficiency in additional languages also, in turn, promotes proficiency in the native language. The implications are clear: we must not forget to ensure that children are grounded in and enriched by their cultures—which includes their native language—so that they can best reach their potential to become literate and healthy—global participants.

Having roots solidly anchored in the rich soil of their indigenous languages and cultures, and in English, will allow our children not only to thrive in school, but also to prosper despite the winds of change that continue to buffet our region. We’ve long suspected this was so; now research has proven it.



Photo by Ray Wong

Thomas W. Barlow, EdD  
PREL President & Chief Executive Officer

