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## Seeking better understanding on aspects of English proficiency in ARoB

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### Abstract

It is considered an asset to have good analytic and communication skills and an eye for detail in writing. In all aspects of communications one is likely to spend time massaging an array of texts and when done well could mean better future opportunities. Production of captivating written reports, letters, marketing brochures or even lectures and presentations are part of the mix. Success in a career is often the result of using language professionally such as in journalism and creative writing where it pays to know the structure of good plain English. In this paper, I use primary data to search for a deeper understanding on aspects of English proficiency in ARoB.

### Keywords

English proficiency, plain English, common denominator, lingua franca, business communications and communication skills, globalization, conditions to improve learning, Papua New Guinea National Qualifications Framework.

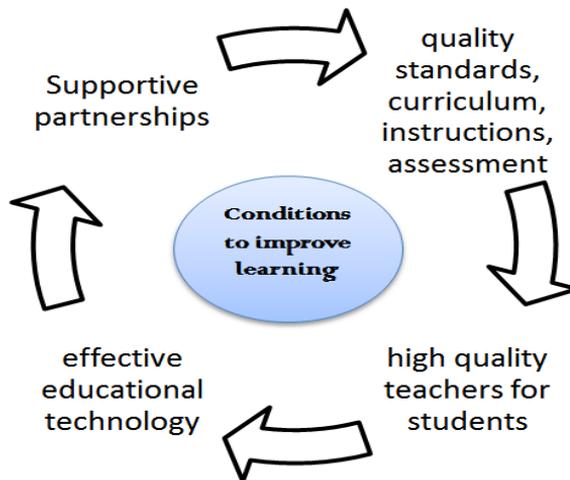
### Introduction

English proficiency is invaluable against the backdrop of globalization, demanding nations and people across the globe to elevate communication skills to suite diverse circumstances (Hoang 2010). International firms operate across countries with varying languages and cultures necessitating a common denominator as the communication medium. The illustration in Figure 1 views cross cultures of international enterprises in the midst of diversified languages. In this consideration, one begs the questions; is English proficiency the common denominator? And if so what is the demand for English proficiency in the Autonomous region of Bougainville (ARoB)?

Some indicators of English proficiency point to competent levels of reading, writing and oral presentation across diversified cultures for effective communication for pedagogical purposes (Varantola 2012). A working perspective of English communication enables one to explore the world interacting with other people regarding all aspects of life. This may also mean that those who command a professional level of spoken, written and oral English have the freedom to express themselves in various ways by communicating with people from all walks of life. ARoB is heading towards referendum, a vote which will determine the region's political future. The aftermath of

the referendum may be uncertain, however, English proficiency is necessary to initiate, drive and maintain sustainable development in the face of a constantly changing and internationalised economy.

The aim of this paper is to explore the antecedents that shape (or otherwise) English proficiency in ARoB juxtaposed with conditions to improve learning by Stumbo, Circo, and Lust (2005). This paper uses primary data collected in a survey mapped against identified conditions adapted from literature regarding improving mathematics education by Stumbo *et al.* (2005). The identified conditions are delineated in the following illustration (Figure 1) which will be used as the paradigm to view the primary data collected in the survey.



**Figure 1. Contextualised conditions to improve learning. Source: Stumbo et. al. (2005)**

### **High quality standards, curriculum, instruction and assessment**

High quality standards are very important in stimulating improvements in learning by guiding the development of curriculum, pedagogical methods and assessment strategies. It is important to have policy guidelines and safeguards to promote high quality standards in all aspects of teaching and learning within the respective faculties of the institutions. This is an important starting point. The compilation, development and approval of education curriculum to be used to pursue English proficiency should also be stringent and duly vetted before being commissioned for use.

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### **High quality teachers for students**

What characteristics make up high quality teachers? Having high quality teachers is important to bring to the learning environment creative and innovative – I assert that teachers who are motivated, passionate and deeply committed to teaching and continuous research often deliver quality and capturing lessons to students. I further suggest that quality is not an attribute that happens by chance but it is planned, developed, acquired and built over time through passion, commitment and hard work. Teachers who have these attributes can become quality teachers for students. Moreover, it is important for teachers to be constantly updating their knowledge in order to bring creativity to the classroom. How this may be achieved is discussed in the next paragraph.

Constant research and search for new knowledge is vital both for the learning institution but more importantly for the teacher. By engaging in constant research in the search for new knowledge, creative and innovative pedagogical strategies may emerge which will bring value to learning. The cumulative sum of all this is the nurturing and building of high quality teachers for students.

### **Effective education technology**

Effective educational tools are presumed to be enablers of improved learning. For example, computers are now widely used in all aspects of research and pedagogy therefore may be considered as effective education technology. Add to this, English as the medium of research and pedagogical tool. It is common knowledge that education and research are integral features of modern learning institutions.

Research technology – one of the most important strategies to improve learning is the culture of research and lifelong learning. This aspect needs to be recognised more importantly by educators and all stakeholders. In this domain, the culture of ongoing research is important in ensuring that current knowledge is kept in check whilst ensuring the content used in teaching and learning is current. Research technology includes computer software and hardware used in all manner of investigations to add to the body of knowledge in any field. For example, in the current investigation computer technology supported the design of the research, the data processing from collection to analysis and interpretation stage, not to mention the process of writing, editing and submitting the paper. Hence, effective education technology should be centred on computer hardware and software systems. Some benefits of this approach are discussed in the next paragraph.

A mix of effective education technologies should be adopted putting the student at the centre of teaching and learning. In this way, students get themselves acquainted with technology as an important learning tool. The computer technology skills they learn in schools have real world applications in life after school. Ultimately, effective education technology boosts student learning but more important forms an invaluable skill set

which students can take with them to the workforce. The next section discusses supportive partnerships.

### **Supportive partnerships**

Supportive partnerships are the *raison d'être* for improved English learning in ARoB. It is impossible to discuss improved English learning without even first thinking and installing partnerships between stakeholders. These stakeholders play various roles culminating in the total sum which promotes and improves learning to the benefit of learners.

In the case of ARoB, supportive partnerships are indeed required from landowners, the Autonomous Bougainville Government (ABG), community, families and the learning community. The learning community includes young population presented with the education opportunities. Whilst there may be surprises in some quarters with the mention of landowners, this group who dispense claims over land and other resources where education institutions are installed, need to recognise the importance of improved learning. The multiple spin offs of learnt citizens is likely to bring benefits to the greater community. Hence, the indulgence of the local landowners is necessary so that learning opportunities are not compromised or impeded without reason.

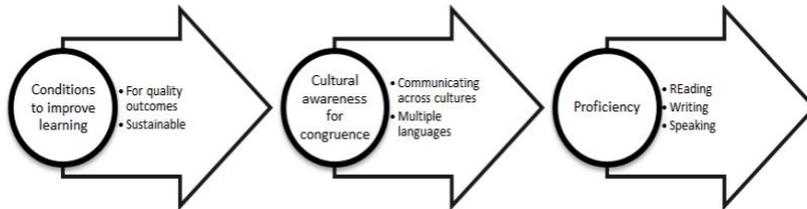
Partnerships such as those between families of learners are important because for a child to succeed, they must have the support of their families. Other partnerships should be with the churches, the private sector and interest groups within the civil society. The supportive partnership arrangements with churches are likely to bring about tangible outcomes because churches usually have significant influence. The next section discusses the contextualised conditions for improved learning for the case of the Autonomous Region of Bougainville (ARoB).

### **Towards English proficiency**

In ARoB, conditions are specifically peculiar due to a civil war that destroyed nearly everything from 1988 to the signing of a peace treaty in 2001. The civil war gave rise to a lost generation who have grown into adulthood and now have families of their own. This lost generation who are mostly illiterate and have children who risk being illiterate because of the basic fact, their illiterate parents may not necessarily recognise and value education. This situation is dire and therefore requires supportive and collective partnerships in order that appropriate interventions may be considered.

National and international liaisons and interactions that occur across cultures are sprinkled with a multitude of languages. Each country possessing its own *lingua franca* enabling citizens to communicate ideas and practices they consider valuable in their lives. In order to conveniently promote business objectives across cultures and languages, the common denominator is likely to be English proficiency. This paper uses interviews, facts and anecdotes to enable deeper understanding of the demand for English (if any) in ARoB. The writings in this paper are marinated by participant

observations and experiences gained whilst working among the population over a protracted period in ARoB.



**Figure 2. Conceptual road map towards English proficiency in ARoB.**

### Literature considerations

According to Doms (2003), English speakers may be categorised into three groups: native speakers, speakers of English as a second language, and speakers of English as a foreign language. ARoB citizens may be categorised as speakers of English as a second language. Even so extra effort may be required to acquire English proficiency, in the face of multiple local languages. The journey towards English proficiency faces many challenges including poor levels of teaching along the education value chain and convoluted by cultural dimensions which may impede those who try to learn by speaking English. Against this backdrop, the opportunity to speak and practise English in ARoB may be limited to the detriment of the desire to learn. This situation has far reaching implications as discussed in the next paragraph.

Countries of the world establish higher learning institutions to create knowledge and skills through research in their pursuit for economic development (Varantola 2012). Higher education and research institutions are training venues for the next generation of leaders, be it in ARoB or other parts of Papua New Guinea (PNG), therefore for students to complete primary and secondary levels and higher degree programs taught in English, they have to attain English proficiency. Equally important is that teachers or trainers using English as the official pedagogical medium need to continuously improve their teaching skills in English. This also builds good image, branding and reputation for the learning institution whilst dispensing quality training opportunities for learners. Next, let us consider some global experiences concerning aspects of English proficiency in those societies.

There are speculations that people appear to lose 30% of their intelligence when attempting to express themselves in a foreign language (Varantola 2012). This is a serious allegation as far as ARoB is concerned since English is a second language in the midst of multiple local languages. I assert that such an allegation requires impeccable and credible research to ascertain its validity but for now let me take it on face value. For example, in Sweden, teachers point out that they are not able to express themselves

as fluently as in their mother tongue when they are teaching in English. Their English language use lacks in detail and in flexibility (Airey 2011). If the Swedish experience is true, then there is no reason to believe that Finnish teachers teaching in English would not feel the same way. The same can be said for other Nordic countries. Let us continue the discussions on another dimension on aspects of English proficiency United States and Britain universities in the next paragraph.

Many Britain and US university academics have publicly complained about the pressure from university officials to pass high-paying international students whose academic performance, often due to poor command of English, is below the required standards (Varantola 2012). These academics are often caught up in difficult situations to either maintain the quality criteria specified in the international education standards or to accept the unethical eligibility which depends on the student's ability to pay on the reasoning that students are merely are customers. And as customers they are entitled to the degree they have bought, irrespective of their performance. This reasoning places the international education standards under serious questions. Let us now consider the cases of South Korea and Vietnam in the next paragraph.

Over many years, Vietnam has gone through a number of colonial powers including the Russians, French, Chinese and English, all which were official languages during their tenure but in the 1990s, English was marked as the number foreign language both inside and outside the formal education system (Hoang 2010). English proficiency in Vietnam has become the passport to a better job not only in the tourism and hospitality industry but many other enterprises as well (Hoang 2010). Currently there are more English students than any other subjects in Vietnam because it is compulsory subject for both undergraduates and graduates at tertiary institutions.

South Korea also views English proficiency as a means to access knowledge and modernization claiming that the world is in English. Deeper meanings maybe articulated in English which are related with discourses of development, democracy, capitalism and modernization among others (Doms 2013). Moreover, there are boundless education and career opportunities necessitating English education at all tiers from the third grade to university. Not surprisingly, 'English language teaching (ELT) has become one of the major growth industries around the world in the past thirty years.' (Crystal 2000). Let me now map what the literature says about English proficiency to the ARoB context in the next paragraph.

There are up to twenty-five distinct languages in ARoB falling into two main groups – the Austronesian family and the Papuan (non-Austronesian), language groups (Tryon 2005). The Austronesian (16 in total) and Papuan (9 of them) languages are not genetically related and have different origins and chronologies. Austronesian languages are found mainly in the northern part of Buka-Bougainville and small pockets of South Bougainville (Banoni/Torokina) and Central Bougainville (Torau/Tarara) while Papuan languages form a geographical continuum from central to south Bougainville (Tryon 2005). Since languages are intertwined with culture, it maybe asserted that ARoB has diverse cultural attributes which operate in various ways as English sets its way into the social fabric of the society as discussed next.

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There are diversified internal and external forces at play as ARoB manoeuvres towards normalcy in preparation for referendum, a vote to be taken in 2019, which will decide the political future of the island. Why is English proficiency important? As experienced in many countries, English proficiency is seen as the medium of international communication and is the language of professional advancement (Hoang 2010). Countries across the world such as Singapore, Honk Kong, India, South Korea and those in the Nordic region have all recognised the importance of and benefited from English as a global language (Piono and Haydon 2010, Varantola 2012). ARoB has its own set of linguistic and cultural diversity, which should be preserved for the potential range of human thought and creativity it contains, and because cultural aspects across generations are best performed by the local language. However, English proficiency offers the tools for the new economy which ARoB is anticipating to enter. The new economy is a different kettle of fish which requires a new set of skills and knowledge. English proficiency can sustain development and speed up modernisation (Varantola 2012).

### **Survey data**

A survey was conducted among a sample of people coming from districts in ARoB to gauge their point of views regarding the demand for English proficiency. The data collection instrument was designed to harvest both quantitative and qualitative data. This paper uses primary data collected across ARoB using a pilot tested instrument. These data were analysed using Minitab to identify associations between variables for deeper understanding.

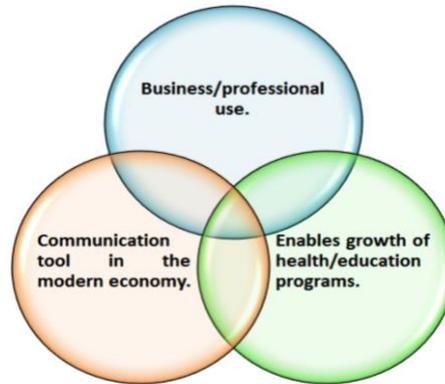
### **Data analysis**

In the course of the investigation, there were four main emergent categorisations of the ideas under which major themes were grouped regarding English proficiency in ARoB. These categorisations are (1) valued attributes of English (2) determinants of English proficiency, (3) impediments to English proficiency and (4) other aspects of English proficiency. In the order of the above list, these four categories are expanded and discussed individually in the following paragraphs.

### **Valued attributes of English proficiency**

The written responses from the interviewees were analysed by considering the meanings of the original words used. This proved to be interesting in that the overarching theme concerning the valued attributes of English proficiency encapsulates socioeconomic variables. For example, the theme that competence in English is important to business and professional use manifests relevance to work and income matters. Next there was a recurring theme pointing to the use of plain English to support the growth of education and health where communication between professionals and audience in understanding English may lead to tangible outcomes. Then the knowledge and use of English in church added a spiritual dimension to the investigation. The text analyses also showed

interviewees expressing that English proficiency may serve as an indispensable communication tool in the modern economy. A summary of the universe of themes related to the valued attributes of English proficiency in ARoB is shown in the following Venn diagram.



**Figure 3. Summary of themes – valued attributes of English proficiency**

It is interesting to note that the valued attributes of English proficiency have strong connotations with socioeconomic issues encapsulating business and professional value of English proficiency, enabler of health and education programs and equally as an important means of communication in the modern economy.

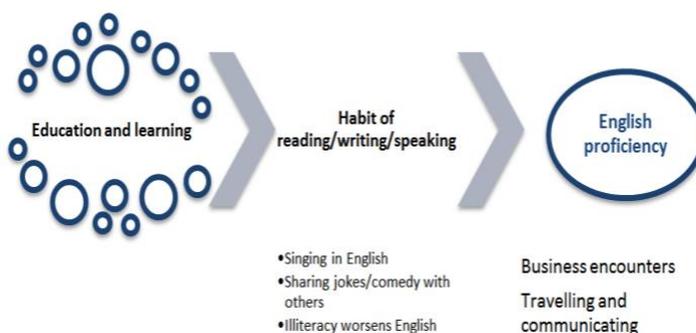
The significance of displaying the themes in a Venn diagram is; it provides an opportunity to find meanings at intersection and union points illuminating paradoxes, similarities and gaps. For example, similarities between the blue circle and the orange circle (where they both cut into each other) are manifestations of comments such as *'Good English is the road to success'* and *'English is the pathway towards future opportunities'* (R001). A similar assertion can be drawn on the similarities between the orange and blue circles as reflected by the comment *'English is a modern day communication medium'* which may support the growth of health and education initiatives in ARoB. Moreover, the commonality between the green and blue circle is well summarised by the comment *'English proficiency by professional workers'* may enhance the growth of health and education services in ARoB. *Ceteris paribus*, the overarching commonality in the Venn diagram (intersection of all three circles) is well represented by the comment that English proficiency is an enabler of social economic issues in ARoB. This is an interesting finding regarding the valued attributes of English proficiency.

What about paradoxes? Some comments to the contrary were identified, in particular, the failure to recognize the importance of education and learning. This particular theme has cultural connotations, revealing itself in various manifestations such as people mocking those who speak English. For the individual the *'fear of making mistakes'* in the presence of others is often an impediment to developing good English skills. These

factors often reveal themselves among communities because ARoB is a small island with more than thirty languages (Tryon 2005). The next section discusses the determinants of English proficiency.

**Determinants of English proficiency**

The study also collected data to ascertain the determinants of English proficiency in ARoB. These determinants support (or otherwise) English proficiency in ARoB (Figure 4).

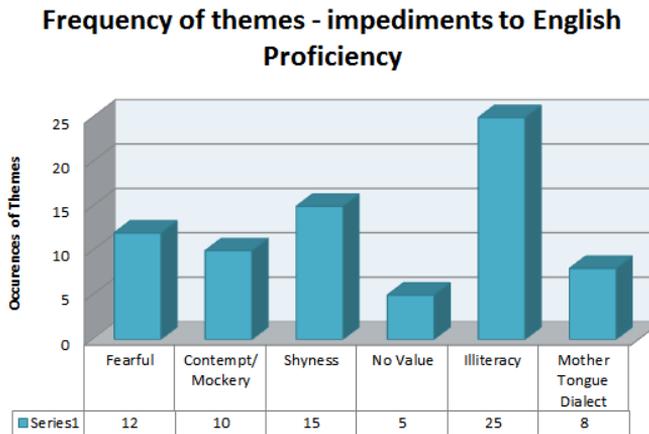


**Figure 4. Major themes on determinants of English proficiency in ARoB**

Whilst education and learning was identified as the main determinant of English proficiency, business dealings with overseas partners also appeared regularly. Interviewees also claimed that traveling and communicating outside PNG was an important determinant in English proficiency. This is true because if an ARoB citizen dares to travel out, chances are that the *lingua franca* to be used whilst en route to one’s destination is likely to be English. The other interesting finding relates to health talks in communities where English is used by professional healthcare workers to conduct awareness within communities. An interviewee asserted that the health talks in communities availed an avenue to converse in English but healthcare workers need to work hard to use plain English which could be better understand

**Impediments to English proficiency**

Certain impediments to learning English were also identified during the survey in ARoB. In the main, the identified impediments show silhouettes of cultural attributes which are deeply rooted into the fabric of the society. For example, the following graph (Figure 5) showing the frequency of themes – showing impediments to English proficiency all identify variables which are cultural in nature. Each of these variables is discussed next.



**Figure 5. Impediments to English Proficiency: The shades of culture in all variables are visible.**

The theme that being fearful of making mistakes in the presence of others was common enough to be identified during the analysis. Being fearful has cultural connections, meaning that people want to be perceived as knowledgeable and don't want to be seen to make mistakes. This is an unfortunate situation and contrary to a common saying 'We all learn from our mistakes'.

The second variable concerns being laughed at or mocked or even viewed with contempt. Asserted an interviewee: 'it is a common practice for people to behave toward those who attempt to speak English with contemptuous behaviour', which then discourages people from trying out or practicing their oral English. Interestingly, the same cannot be said of those who write in English. In fact, people who possess English writing skills are highly sought after by other members of the community when it comes to writing letters, notices and other correspondences.

The theme regarding '*shy to speak English in public*' appeared often during the thematic analysis and may be connected to the attitude of 'being right', but a closer look may show silhouettes of the 'being proud' culture. In some instances this could be a disadvantage because 'being proud' may prevent learners from taking a chance at practising English. This may lead to missed opportunities in learning a language that is perceived to be an important international business language (Crystal 2000).

The themes '*no value*' and '*illiteracy*' are closely connected together and may be one of the same because an illiterate person is unable to value English proficiency. This is so true because the world that an illiterate person knows is totally different to the worldview of people with some education background. Hence, these variables or themes are major impediments to English proficiency which may require a paradigm shift in thinking and behaving. Lastly, the '*mother tongue dialect*' prevents one from easily speaking English as the natural tendency to revert to one's mother tongue makes it difficult to explain issues under discussion.

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### **Other aspects of English proficiency**

There were also other aspects identified during survey, the main one being that English is a valuable international language which enables knowledge building and trading with overseas countries convenient. English is also considered to be the pathway to the world knowledge base which may enable clear communication in communities. An interviewee claimed that '*Clear communication in communities is absent due to lack of English knowledge*'. It was claimed that this situation led to issues not being clearly understood and many times communications were misunderstood. This paved the way to misinterpretation and often mistrust between various groups or individuals because the right information did not reach the intended targets. However a suggested way forward was also identified which is discussed next.

Early childhood programs in ARoB communities are considered a good strategy which enables young children to learn English through activities designed and given a school. This enables young children to learn, practice and speak English, thus building a habit of speaking it apart from their mother tongue. The interviewee claimed that early childhood programs in ARoB was a good test bed for growing English by getting young people into speaking and learning opening up diversified opportunities into the future. These claims could be monitored over time to ascertain progress and draw comparisons with the status quo. I now move on to offer some interpretations by way of discussing the themes in the next section.

### **From success to freedom**

Among those that were interviewed in the survey, some expressed views that English proficiency shapes the road to success and freedom. Loosely speaking, in the context of this paper, the word success may mean achieving or fulfilment of an objective, aim or purpose. It seems likely that interviewees asserting English as an enabler of success could be asserting or claiming it to be a determinant of an array of activities people have reason to value. For example, in business, English communication in reading and writing correspondences involving exchange of goods, services and the associated financial transactions occurs between people from different cultures and background. In particular, ARoB businessmen conduct business with foreigners who operate in other provinces. The data also revealed that for business to flower with ease, proficiency in English is important. It is not difficult to imagine that competence in English makes communication between parties easier to support business. The next section discusses the data collected during the survey.

### **Discussion**

The previous section laid out verbatim the themes, values and ideas originating from the data collected through the survey in ARoB. It now serves useful purpose to discuss these themes and how they stand within the conditions for improved learning framework. The first set of themes is the valued attributes of English proficiency which

eclipses socioeconomic parameters. How may this be viewed within the conditions of improved learning framework?

The conditions of improved learning emphasise quality standards, curriculum, instructions and assessment as important antecedents for successful outcomes. These have to be supplemented by high quality teachers who may be well supported or well versed in using effective educational technology. *Ceteris paribus*, the valued attributes of English proficiency pertaining to socioeconomic indicators may fetch tangible outcomes as reflected by the themes from the survey. This is to say that given the appropriate conditions and support in accordance with the framework, tangible or practical values may be realised from English proficiency in ARoB.

Needless to say that the identified socioeconomic indicators include a number of important areas such as aspects of business, professional use of English, English proficiency as enablers of an array of health and education programs and as important communication medium in the modern economy. These are important considerations which under appropriate conditions may contribute well in the long term development aspirations of ARoB. Let me reflect and discuss the next theme encapsulating the determinants of English proficiency in the next paragraph.

There was nothing surprising concerning the research findings on determinants of English proficiency in ARoB because the indicators are consistent with what current literature offers. For example, an array of education and learning programs were considered to be invaluable determinants of English proficiency in ARoB. Fullan (2006) asserts that having a theory is not good enough in itself but those involved should push its application to the next level to ensure that the theory is action oriented. In this sense, education and learning programs to achieve English proficiency in ARoB should be founded upon stringent conditions of improved learning emphasising quality standards, curriculum, instructions and assessment as important antecedents for successful outcomes. Moreover, for the case of ARoB, this means also that learning institutions should endure to comply with the national qualifications framework set out by the authorities (National Higher and Technical Education Board) whilst at the same time there should be regular revisions and updates of this framework to ensure its relevance with the real world. This statement has strong connotations to the idea of supportive partnerships laid out in the conditions for improved learning framework (Stumbo et. al. 2005).

The peripheral themes vis-à-vis travelling and communicating in foreign lands reflect silhouettes of globalisation which are also determinants of English proficiency. This is because English proficiency may be taken as a common denominator in travelling and communicating. Against the backdrop of the conditions of improved learning (Stumbo et. al. 2005), travelling and communicating in foreign lands could be asserted and learning through reflection, thinking and doing (Fullan 2006). This aspect of travelling and communicating touches on the earlier theme of communicating across cultures. Let me now discuss the cultural aspects of English proficiency through the conditions of improved learning paradigm.

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Cultural attributes graphed in an earlier section were manifestations of barriers to English proficiency in ARoB. Being fearful of making English mistakes in public, being seen with contempt for speaking in English, shyness to try out English in public, unable to recognise any value in English, illiteracy worsening English and the effects of mother tongue are all cultural aspects which form barriers to English proficiency in ARoB. How these barriers may be overcome is a possible future research proposition. For now I assert that given appropriate conditions such as motivations through quality standards, curriculums, instructions and assessments with high quality teachers who use effective educational technology through supportive partnerships, these barriers maybe mitigated.

This research also identified other interesting aspects of English proficiency in ARoB. As earlier identified, respondents also claimed that English proficiency is a valuable international language which enables knowledge building and trading with the global community. English is considered to be the pathway to the world knowledge. An example was given that communication gaps in communities were due to lack of English knowledge. A suggested way out of this predicament is the early childhood programs in ARoB which enables young children to learn, practice and speak English through plays, songs and other activities given in schools. This is a good example of supportive partnerships delineated in the conditions for improved learning framework.

## **Conclusion**

This research set out to search for a deeper understanding on aspects of English proficiency in ARoB. Existing facts and anecdotes point to a lower level of English proficiency in ARoB and as suggested by the identified themes, such are reflections of a significant level of illiteracy in ARoB (Figure 5). However, certain interesting ideas and issues were identified during the course of the research. An important finding of this research is that English proficiency is an enabler of socioeconomic progress in ARoB. This finding should send a signal to authorities to strengthen supportive frameworks for English proficiency in ARoB.

The findings also identified the main determinant of English proficiency to be education and learning. The conditions for improve learning framework (Stumbo et. al. 2005) offered a good paradigm to discuss the findings however, when using such paradigms it is useful to ensure that the cultural context is taken into consideration. In deed in this research, the principal barriers to English proficiency were identified to be strongly connected to the culture of ARoB. This requires highly motivational and quality standards and pedagogical interventions to overcome these barriers such as high quality teachers and effective educational technology with action oriented supportive partnerships.

The last important finding of this research is that English proficiency is considered a pathway to all manner of opportunities such as knowledge, business, travelling, improved chances of employment and information dissemination in communities among others. I suggest that this is an important research that could be continued for better understanding of other perspectives on the topic or similar topics. What are the future

possibilities of English proficiency in ARoB and the rest of PNG? How can the barriers to English proficiency be minimized? How can English coexist with the indigenous languages for maximised utilisation to support the country's progress?

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