

報告

Reading Marathon Room: Historical Origins, Current Usage, and Students' Experience

リーディングマラソン室の歴史と現在の利用状況および学生の認識に関する報告

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Keywords: *extensive reading, English tutoring, support services*
多読, 英語の個別指導, 支援サービス

1. Introduction – a brief history

The International Cultural Studies Department Reading and Listening Marathon was implemented in 2006 at the instigation of former faculty member Catlin Hanna Evans. Research for some years had confirmed that routine, regular reading and listening to *enjoyable and interesting English material at a slightly easy level* reinforces the student's learning and helps to move it into long-term memory (e.g. Day & Bamford, 2002; Mason & Krashen, 1997; Nation, 1997 etc.). An extensive reading movement emerged and thousands of extensive reading programmes were set up in school around the world.

At that time, the department's students had access to a Self-Study Room stocked with a collection of miscellaneous English books, magazines, maps, and graded readers (one complete set and one partial one), along with English video materials. While this room remained a space for students' study, project work, video homework, and other functions, the International Cultural Studies Department dedicated a separate room for the development of an extensive reading programme, The Reading Marathon Room (RMR hereafter).

Following the trend at that time, the early RMR stocked and promoted full sets of graded readers, first from Oxford and Penguin Publishers, then expanding to Black Cat and other publishers. Many publishers initially concentrated on the publication of simplified versions of classic literature. In response to demand, however, publishers have since offered a wider variety of extensive reading materials. Through the years, the RMR has made annual additions such as books bundled with audio files for extensive listening, as well as reading; high-interest nonfiction topics (e.g. ecology, area studies, etc.); biographies; stories based on popular movies; etc. Additionally, journals and magazines for English learners, preparatory materials for English test-takers, and other special items have been added. The RMR currently holds 500 English books and journals. The number of book + CD titles is over 200.

While the central use of the room has always been extensive reading, in some years, extensive listening of the book CDs was added to supplement English class work. In fact, the RMR has become the

nexus for a variety of extensive English learning skills complementing English class activities and programmes at various times. Presently, it also offers tutoring and support for students' writing, presentation and speaking, as well as extensive listening and the original purpose, extensive reading. Thus the purpose of the Marathon Room has evolved to give extra-curricular English language support and exposure to English for our students.

As the purpose of the RMR has flexibly evolved and responded to classroom needs, the role of the room's assistant has changed somewhat from one year to the next. Initially, the assistant's role was essentially to check materials out to students, and check them in again, briefly discuss the books' contents with students and record students' progress. This role was first filled by the department's English instructors during a few scheduled hours a week. In ensuing years, this role has expanded as it became apparent that the assistant provides a number of critical functions, including active maintenance of the collection and vital social interaction with the students. Currently, the assistant manages all aspects of students' visits to the RMR:

- a. Extensive reading and extensive listening materials, assigned or self-selected;
- b. Advising, correction and tutoring of English assignments in writing, presentation scripts and other English class projects; and
- c. Extensive English conversation practice which, while not an original goal of the room, has consistently been found by students to be valuable.

In this report, we will describe the current functions of the RMR for the 2013-14 year and how it complements the English classes of the International Cultural Studies Department with extensive skills practice and student support. We also will describe the usage of its materials in this year, including the frequency of borrowings, number of advising meetings, and estimate of English conversations held. Finally, we will report the responses of the students to a questionnaire designed to investigate their participation in and engagement with the RMR's functions, and their assessment of the value of this programme.

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2. Expanded functions of the RMR; expanded pedagogical role of the assistant

As the room has continued to be used, we have been able to employ various graduate student assistants, community members, an exchange student, and part-time English instructors in the role of assistant. Shifting requirements in the English classes (required/optional use of the materials, extensive reading/extensive listening, tutoring and support for class assignments), and different talents and abilities of the assistants, brought a gradual realization that the scope and pedagogical functions of both the RMR and the assistant's role is much wider than we expected.

The uses of the RMR have grown beyond simple archiving and lending of graded readers. English instructors have been able to add extensive listening practice of audio materials, optional access to TOEIC and other English test preparation materials, temporary placement of instructional materials for students to borrow, tutoring of writing assignments and presentation scripts, and extra-curricular extensive conversation practice to the room's purposes. The extent of the room's uses is reported in the Results section below.

Further, it has become apparent that the room's assistant has two critical roles. First, there are important clerical and record-keeping tasks such as checking materials in and out and maintaining individual student records of borrowing. Most of these records are tabulated for instructors' uses; individual students' records are incorporated into grade calculations by the instructors.¹ Second, we have recently asked the assistant to help students with English class assignments, offering assignment guidance, writing correction and tutoring, and assistance with reading comprehension.

Additionally, the creative talents and social capabilities of the assistant to maintain a comfortable social environment directly influences the pedagogical success of the Marathon Room.² They include maintaining materials in order and labelling sub collections, creating attractive displays of the materials, recommending new and replacement purchases, creating posters and flyers with Room information, creating attractive and interesting arrangements of the books and other materials, promoting materials with thematic posters and decorations, coaching appropriate selections by the students, post-reading discussion with students, and informal extensive conversation with students. See Appendix for the assistant's personal notes about her experience in the RMR.

We have found that the students themselves repeatedly

¹ Current participating instructors include Christine Winskowski, Anders Carlqvist, and Harumi Ogawa.

² Our current assistant is Kathryn Akasaka, part-time English instructor at Morioka Junior College, Iwate University, and Shirayuri Gakuen Primary School.

confirm the value of English learning through extensive reading, importance of the "right kind of person" in the role of RMR assistant, and a comfortably inviting atmosphere. Students' survey responses to and engagement with the room are reported in the Results section below.

3. Results for RMR 2013-14 use

A. Frequency of RMR uses

In this section, we report the frequency of various RMR uses for Spring and Fall semesters of 2013-14. These include the frequency of materials borrowings, classified by type, frequency of tutorial/support visits, and frequency of spontaneous conversation visits. It should be noted that in 2013-14, the first-year students were assigned to read 15 pages/week; second-year students were assigned one book/week outside their English classes. Of course, students were free to go beyond these requirements at will. Requirements to receive advising on class assignments varied by class and by assignment; students always had the option of requesting correction and advice by the RMR assistant. Informal conversations – that is, the opportunity for students to practice extensive conversation in a spontaneous, low-stress fashion – were a function of the room that became evident in recent years. This year, we decided to assess the frequency of extensive conversation in the room.

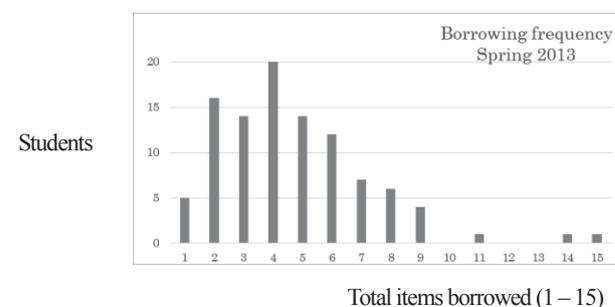
Spring 2013

1. Total materials borrowings – 414

Borrowing in Special Categories

Books + CDs	162
Books based on movies	118
Nonfiction books	76
Biographical books	34
Journals/magazines	24

2. Frequency of individuals' borrowing totals (i.e. number of students borrowing 1 item, 2 items, 3 items, etc.)



3. Advising consultations on assignments 192

4. Extensive conversation visits in English (est.) 150

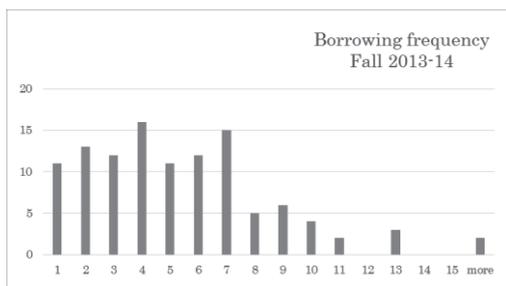
Fall 2014

1. Total materials borrowings – 428

Borrowing in Special Categories

Books + CDs	214
Books based on movies	111
Nonfiction books	52
Biographical books	28
Journals/magazines	23

2. Frequency of individuals' borrowing totals (i.e. number of students borrowing 1 item, 2 items, 3 items, etc.)



Total items borrowed (1 – 15+)

3. Advising consultations on assignments 163

4. Extensive conversation visits in English (est.) 176

B. Questionnaire results

A questionnaire was developed to determine the extent of students' use of the RMR and to investigate the quality their experience with the room. Particularly, we wished to understand students' subjective perspective on the success of the room for enhancing their English skills through interaction with interesting extensive English texts, and informal, low-stress, pleasant assignment tutoring and interaction with the room's assistant. The questionnaire was distributed to all the students at the Department of International Cultural Studies in December 2013.

The questionnaire items with results follow (N = 112):

1. How many times a week do you usually visit the Reading Marathon room?

- | | | | |
|----------------------|----|-------------------|----|
| a. More than 3 times | 2 | b. 2 times a week | 10 |
| c. Once a week | 87 | d. Rarely/Never | 13 |

2. How do you choose a book to read? (複数回答可)

- | | |
|--|----|
| a. By choosing something recommended by friends and teachers | 25 |
| b. Interesting cover | 45 |
| c. Interesting topic | 85 |
| d. Something easy | 29 |

e. Other 2

Please explain : [no responses]

3. Have you had any help from Kathryn-sensei in the Reading Marathon room?

Yes 111 No 1

→If 'yes', what kind of help have you had? (複数回答可) *

- | | |
|--------------------------|-----|
| a. Conversation practice | 5 |
| b. Writing advice | 105 |
| c. Presentation advice | 32 |
| d. Choosing a book | 34 |
| e. Other | 3 |

Please explain: [no responses]

* Identification of the students' classes associated with each activity is omitted.

If 'no', why have you not had any help from Kathryn-sensei? (複数回答可)

- | | |
|---|---|
| a. I am confident to do the work on my own. | 1 |
| b. I never have time to go to the R M room | 0 |
| c. Other | 0 |

Please explain [no responses]

4. Do you think your reading fluency has improved since you started coming to this room? Yes 93 No 19

5. Do you think your writing skills have improved since you started coming to this room? Yes 96 No 16

6. Do you think your listening skills have improved since you started coming to this room? Yes 55 No 56

7. Do you think your speaking skills have improved since you started coming to this room? Yes 62 No 48

For questionnaire Item 8 and Item 9, selected student responses are shown here. The comments that had originally been written in Japanese were translated into English by the authors.

8. What do you like about the Reading Marathon room? (日本語での回答可)

- There are many English books, all different levels.
- 部屋のかざりから感じる楽しそうな雰囲気 (The fun atmosphere of the room decorated by different things)
- 実際に英語を使いながら本を選んだり宿題を見てもらったりすることで、普通の会話が楽しめること。(I can use English while getting help with choosing books and with homework. I can enjoy general

conversation.)

- There are English comic books.
- キャサリン先生がわかりにくい説明のときは日本語で説明してくれるのですごく分かりやすいです。日本語で話しかければ日本語で応えてくれるので、やる気があるときは確実に英語力を向上させることができます。(When the explanation is difficult, Kathryn sensei uses Japanese and it is really easy to understand. When I speak to her in Japanese, she responds in Japanese. When I am motivated, it certainly helps my English ability.)
- Choosing many books, improving writing skills, and especially talking with Ms Akasaka is so fun!
- 気軽に行くことができる。英語のアドバイスがもらえる。(The room is accessible and I can get advice on my English.)
- キャンディーがもらえる。(I can get lollies.)
- 好きです。心地いいです。(I like the room. It is comfortable.)
- キャサリン先生がアドバイスやチェックをしてくれるところ。(Kathryn sensei gives me advice and checks my English.)
- ドアが開いていて入りやすいところ。(The door is open and easy to go in.)
- Conversation with Kathryn sensei
- 気軽に英語と触れ合うことができる。(I can have English experience in a relaxed manner.)
- 英語の授業の手助けをしてくれるとこと。(I can get help with my English classes.)
- I like a feature on season. eg. Halloween.
- 文の直しや本を借りるだけでなく、キャサリン先生とたわいもない話をするのがすごくいいと思う。(Not only getting help with sentence correction and borrowing books, but chatting casually with Kathryn sensei is great.
- たくさんの物語を英語で読めて楽しい。(It is fun to read many stories in English.)
- 英会話の雑誌がおいてある。毎月自分で購入することが難しいので置いてあると嬉しい。(There are English conversation journals in the room. It is difficult to buy them myself every month, so it is good we can borrow journals, too.
- 授業（特にプレゼンテーション）の予習を手伝ってくれるのが嬉しい。(It is so nice that we can get help with preparing for presentations.)

9. Any other comments? Please put them here. (日本語での回答可)

- キャサリン先生が優しい。(Kathryn sensei is kind.)

- 本を借りる人とコメントをもらっている人の列をバラバラにしてほしい。(There should be separate lines for people who want to get advice and for people who want to borrow books.)
- キャサリン先生がいる時間をもっと増やしてほしい。(I would like Kathryn sensei to be in the room longer.)
- Visiting this room improved my word level.
- 授業の兼ね合いでなかなか時間があわない。(I cannot visit the room because of the class schedule.)
- 毎日お昼 12:00-1:00 は部屋を空けてほしいですし、2冊じゃ少ないので 5冊は借りられるようにしてほしいです。もっと最近の本を増やしてほしいです。もっと厚い本がほしいです。(I would like the room to be open every day from 12:00-1:00. I would like to borrow 5 books instead of 2. Two books is too few. I would like more recent books and thicker books.)
- Thank you for your advice.
- 限られた時間しか空いていないので、その時間に人が集中してしまいます。(The room is open only for limited hours, so it gets crowded.)
- 多読は外国語を学ぶ上で有効だと実感しました。(I can see that extensive reading is effective in learning a foreign language.)
- リーディングマラソンのおかげでリーディング、ライティングの力が前よりスキルアップしたと思います。リーディングマラソン室のおかげで英語が好きになりました。(My reading and writing skills have improved because of the reading marathon programme. I came to like English because of the RMR.
- 映画の本や有名人の伝記物があること、文章量などちょうどよくて読みやすい本がたくさんあっていい。またいつも整理されていて見やすい。(I like the fact that there are stories from movies and famous people. Those books have appropriate amount of texts and they are easy to read. The books are always well organized and easy to look at.
- お勧めのほんのコーナーは行くとチェックしています。(I always check the recommended books corner whenever I go there.)
- ネイティブな英語を話す先生とコミュニケーションをとれるところが好きです。(I like it because I can talk to a teacher who is a native speaker of English.)
- 先生は私たちの授業内容を知っていてくれるので動画を見せてくれたりするところが好きです。(The teacher knows what is taught in our English classes and helps us by showing videos, which is nice.)

5. Discussion

A. On Marathon Room Usage

The statistics on the RMR usage offer a profile of the

students' engagement with the room's functions. As to the numbers on materials' borrowing, the total borrowings equal 414 for Spring 2013 and 428 for Fall 2013, approximately 4 items per student each semester. These numbers are not as high as we would like, yet it does show some exposure to extensive reading in a young population which seems to be reading less for pleasure than previous generations. Narratives or stories clearly remain a top selection, with movie-related stories of special interest. However, a significant minority of students choose nonfiction, and to a lesser extent, biography and popular culture in magazines. While the majority of students borrowed 2-6 items in Spring and 1-7 in Fall, about 20% in both fall and spring respectively borrowed more, suggesting that some students may be already be more motivated to read routinely for pleasure. While all students can benefit from extensive reading, this path can provide an even more central autonomous path to English skill for those strongly motivated to read.

The results on the students' assignment tutoring and advising visits and extensive conversation visits indicate strong interest by the students. Assignment advising has focused mainly on tutoring and correction of students' written work. The impetus for this service has come in recent years, since there seems to be more discrepancy between students with more advanced skills and those who have limited skills. The kind of assistance given to the students in the RMR is useful to cater for different students' needs. Some students need very basic grammatical help whereas others could benefit from explanation of nuances in meaning. Because of the more individual support given to the students outside the class in the RMR, the classroom teachers can focus on other linguistic and communicative elements in language teaching during class time.

The frequency of students seeking out opportunities to talk in English with the assistant suggests a demand for the opportunity to use English they have learned and practised in the class.

It should be noted that instructors can and do frequently communicate with the assistant and share what is being taught in classes, which was also helpful in giving nuanced support to the students.

B. On RMR questionnaire results

The RMR Questionnaire results provide several useful observations.

From Item 1 (number of room visits), we can see the vast majority of students (87/112) make at least one requisite visit to the RMR per week, and a minority go more often. Regrettably, a minority (13/112) also do not or only rarely visit. This, coupled with evidence of below-minimum borrowing for this minority, suggests a need for improvement.

However, essentially, the fundamental purpose of the room, extensive reading, seems to be fulfilled.

Item 2 (how books are selected) shows that students freely follow their personal interest in book selection, and secondarily follow recommendations, which promotes motivation for reading. This seems to follow the accepted wisdom that students following their interest will have heightened motivation.

Item 3 shows that overwhelmingly, 105/112 students have sought the assistant's help for classroom assignments, and to a lesser extent, reading selection. Students' reports of seeking conversation practice seems very low (5 occasions) when compared to the assistants' frequency record (150 in Spring and 176 in Fall); it may be the case that extensive conversation is intermingled with other interaction (usefully and naturally so, we might add), and thus not recalled as a separate event by students.

Items 4-7 report students' self-perceived improvements in English skills. It is noteworthy that overwhelmingly students think their English language skills, especially in reading fluency (93/112) and writing (96/112) skills, have improved. Additionally, about half of the students report improvement in listening skills, and about 60% report improvement in speaking skills.

Items 8 (What do you like?) and 9 (Other comments?) invite students to share their perceptions on using the RMR and offer suggestions, criticisms, and any other observations. Students clearly like the variety and high-interest book offerings in the Reading Marathon programme, as well as the accessibility and pleasantness of the room. The most frequent appreciation expressed, however, is for the specific kinds of help with English classwork that the assistant provides, and the fact that her help is provided in an accessible and kindly (i.e. non-threatening) way with immediate benefits. A number of comments advocated a need for even more availability of the RMR's services in expanded hours and days.

6. Reflections and future implications

As can be understood from the data and the students' comments, it is obvious that the assistance given in the RMR directly impacts students' engagement with, and interest in, English, promoting increased motivation and autonomous learning. We are encouraged that the initial mission of the RMR is being fulfilled. At the same time, there is room for improvement in encouraging an even higher rate of student participation.

The capability of catering for diverse individual needs for the students through individual tutoring and guidance of students' work seems to have powerful potential. In fact, it expands the "reach" of teaching initiatives beyond the classroom. This is significant in the International Cultural Studies Department in light of the recent amalgamation of the

two-45 minute-period/week English class structure into the conventional single 90 minute period/week. As has been pointed out (Winkowski & Hanna, 2006), a single, long period of massed practice is a weaker pedagogical design for learning complex cognitive habits such as foreign language than shorter periods of distributive practice. However, while correction of and advising on student assignments cannot replace instructional time, it can reinforce and support classroom teaching. Additionally, as noted above, such support can be responsive to students' individual needs.

In conclusion, we find now that the RMR provides critical elements of support for our English classes.

【要旨】

本報告では、盛岡短期大学のリーディングマラソン室の歴史を説明し、リーディングマラソン室の資料の貸し出し状況や、またリーディングマラソン室に対する学生の意見を調査したアンケート結果を提示した。本来は、語学学習において効果的といわれている多読を推進するために用意された部屋であったが、今では学生のさまざまな語学学習のニーズに対応するようになってきた。リーディングマラソン室のアシスタントは、単に資料の貸し出しを行うといった事務的な仕事だけでなく、英語の授業で行うプレゼンテーションの原稿をチェックしたり、ライティングのアドバイスをしたりといった個別指導も行っている。また英会話のパートナーとしての役割も果たしており、国際文化学科の学生全員を対象としたアンケート調査からは、「気軽に英語で話せる部屋があってよい」、「リーディングマラソン室の利用時間をもっと増やしてほしい」などという肯定的なコメントが数多く寄せられた。

Acknowledgements

In the spirit of imitation being the most sincere form of flattery, we would like to express our grateful appreciation of Iwate University's Reading Marathon programme for providing the inspiration for our programme, and indeed, for its very name. We are also thankful for the Koenkai (Parent Teacher Student Association) of the Morioka Junior College and President Yoshihisa Nakamura for the financial support to this programme.

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Appendix: Personal notes from Kathryn Akasaka, RMR assistant for 2013-2014

I am an avid reader. I love books, so working in the Reading Marathon Room is like a dream come true for me. The selection of books is amazing; there are mysteries, love stories, nonfiction, biographies, books based on movies and TV shows and much, much more.

One of the great joys I have is helping students to select a book. I think it is fair to say most have never read an entire book in English before visiting the RMR. If they have read a book the chances are it was not at title of their own choosing. It is wonderful to walk around the RMR and look at all the possible selections; many have colour illustrations or are graphic novels (comic books). Many of the books come with CDs or have links to web sites for further listening practice. It is also rewarding to see students challenge themselves to read longer or more difficult books as the semester/year progresses. As the survey results show a majority of the students report an increased ability in their reading proficiency as a result of the RMR.

The other part of my job is as an academic advisor. I help with checking reports, homework, essays and presentations. I offer advice on comprehension of the text and have also shown videos on YouTube to help explain a point or help illustrate a time in history. As much as possible I encourage the students to think critically about their own work and grammatical mistakes.

An unofficial part of the job is conversation partner. I am chatty by nature. I make it a point to speak English to all who visit the RMR. I do speak Japanese and will explain about cultural differences or writing mistakes in Japanese. But, the RMR also provides an opportunity for natural English communication. I cannot stress enough what a treasure IPU has in the RMR. It is truly a model that other Universities should strive to emulate.