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

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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 & Barmford, 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.

*1 Department of International Cultural Studies  *2 Department of International Cultural Studies  *3 Reading Marathon Room assistant
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. 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. 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 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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Borrowing</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total materials borrowings</td>
<td>414</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Books + CDs</td>
<td>162</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Books based on movies</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonfiction books</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biographical books</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journals/magazines</td>
<td>24</td>
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</table>

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Students</th>
<th>Total items borrowed (1 – 15)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>10</td>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>15</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3. Advising consultations on assignments | 192 |
4. Extensive conversation visits in English (est.) | 150 |
Fall 2014

1. Total materials borrowings – 428

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Borrowing in Special Categories</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Books + CDs</td>
<td>214</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Books based on movies</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonfiction books</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biographical books</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journals/magazines</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Students</th>
<th>Total items borrowed (1 – 15+)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

   c. 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]

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.
   • The fun atmosphere of the room decorated by different things.
   • I can use English while getting help with choosing books and with homework. I can enjoy general
There are English comic books.

Choosing many books, improving writing skills, and especially talking with Ms Akasaka is so fun!

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I like a feature on season eg. Halloween.

The room is accessible and I can get advice on my English.

Conversations with Kathryn sensei

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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 (Winskowski & 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.

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.

References


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.