

Sustaining Interest in the Reading Marathon Room

リーディングマラソン室への関心の持続

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1. Introduction

The Reading Marathon Room (RMR) has now served as a staple of the International Cultural Studies Department for a decade, currently housing upwards of 800 English books and magazines available for students to borrow for purposes both recreational and academic. This wealth of English language materials not only runs a well-varied spectrum of topics and genres, but there are reading options for learners of all proficiency levels.

The 2006 inception of the RMR came about in tandem with the department's development of an extensive reading program, following a trend espousing extensive practice and self-access that swept through Japanese universities particularly from the start of this millennium. However, while the RMR itself has changed little in appearance, the objectives and philosophy behind its existence have indeed altered over time; especially given increased English faculty and RMR staff turnover in more recent years. Such turnover has not only affected how the RMR functions as tied to the department's English curriculum and extensive reading goals, but moreover how students perceive the RMR as relating to their own academic needs and interests has changed.

More than just a storehouse of graded readers, the RMR has always aimed to offer students benefits beyond mere access a room full of books, making time for opportunities for one-on-one tutoring, informal conversation, and guidance in selecting and making use of personally beneficial materials. The RMR assistant (initially a role played by full-time teachers before the hiring of outside part-time staffers) works to offer these multiple services, albeit in an increasingly tighter schedule. Limited working hours for RMR assistants (often due to scheduling conflicts), sometimes during less desirable times in relation to student class schedules, has unfortunately meant shorter hours of operation for the RMR itself, which in turn limits students' access to said opportunities for individual tutoring and guidance. This can further lend a negative impression to the RMR's image as not easily accessible, and thus, not an especially attractive alternative for pursuing one-on-one assistance. Such scheduling issues also place constraints on teachers' ability to involve the RMR—both its materials and services—in respective class and overall curriculum objectives.

On top of administrative matters, the RMR's existence as relating to an extensive reading program also necessitates reevaluation. Evidence abounds demonstrating the potential linguistic and psychological merits of extensive reading programs (Day, 2015; Rob & Kano, 2013), yet simply offering students access to well-crafted materials is far from an apt formula for success. Regardless of whether the initial structure supporting extensive reading at the RMR's inception was sound or not, the necessary scaffolding for a proper extensive reading program proves lacking with the present-day RMR, especially with students having rather limited access to necessary materials.

That said, not all is doom and gloom for the RMR. In fact, with International Cultural Studies Department curriculum revisions scheduled for the coming academic year, now stands an ideal time for rethinking the primary objectives of the RMR a decade into its existence. Amidst the difficulties born from the aforementioned administrative issues, rethinking the RMR from the perspective of both current and incoming students is of primary concern if the RMR is to be utilized to its fullest potential. Following this, the possibility of operating a sound extensive reading program, whether as an integral part of the English language curriculum or an optional individual pursuit, can be better discussed.

2. Student Usage Trends and Issues

A look at student usage statistics shows growing inconsistency in RMR visitation, most probably the result of high faculty and part-time assistant turnover. Such increased turnover means not only greater unfamiliarity with the RMR and its services, but furthermore, less continuity in contemplating and initiating improvements to the RMR. Such incongruity no doubt results in similar uncertainty among students regarding the RMR as pertains to their academic interests, which can certainly grow cloudier with each successive semester.

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Total Number of Materials Borrowed

- Academic Year 2016: 563 materials
 - *1st Year Students: 496 materials*
 - *2nd Year Students: 67 materials*
- Academic Year 2015: 281 materials
- Fall Semester 2014: 428 materials

Tutoring Visitations

- Academic Year 2016: 181 visits
 - *1st Year Students: 95 visits*
 - *2nd Year Students: 86 visits*
- Academic Year 2015: 473 visits
- Academic Year 2014: 263 visits

Weekly Visitors

- Academic Year 2016: 50 students
- Academic Year 2015: N/A
- Academic Year 2014: 44 students
- Academic Year 2013: 87 students

Comparing statistics for this academic year with more recent years (Wang & Ogawa, 2015; Ogawa et al., 2014) the above data reflects three areas of particular interest: the total number of materials borrowed by students, the total number of tutoring visitations by students, and the number of weekly visitors to the RMR. A weekly visitor is a student who averages at least one visit to the RMR per week, regardless of the visit's purpose, during months when classes are in session. Of particular note regarding weekly visitation data is that 2013-2014 statistics were self-reported by students as part of a questionnaire concerning RMR usage (unfortunately questionnaire data for 2015 does not exist). The 2016 figure, in contrast, is an estimate based on records of individual student visits over the course of the academic year.

What is clear from looking at these three categories of data is that RMR usage (both regarding frequency and purpose of visits) has fluctuated wildly over recent years. Less obvious without context is why, although semester-to-semester changes in RMR days and hours of operation, reduced faculty reliance on students visiting the RMR for class assignments, and stalled continuity in collaboration between faculty and RMR staff due to high turnover are logical culprits.

Yet despite such circumstances, a committed number of students (although records indicate committed for varying reasons) maintain regular visitation to the RMR. Whether such regular visitations result from individual initiative or class-related needs would demand follow-up examination, but each academic year the RMR undoubtedly plays at the very least an important niche role within the department.

Ideally, however, the RMR would play a more vital role in assisting not simply a niche of the student population, but the majority. Moving in

the direction of such an ideal, however, demands taking into account not only the pedagogical objectives the department's faculty sees the RMR supporting, but equal concern for student body interests and opinions. Such student concerns, as the ones listed below (Wang & Ogawa, 2015; Ogawa et al., 2014), regarding the RMR should also direct departmental efforts for improvement.

Hours of Operation

- The room is open only for limited hours, so it gets crowded.
- I would like the room to be open every day from 12:00-1:00. I would like to borrow five books instead of two. Two books is too few.
- I hope it is open every weekday.
- I would like the room to be open for longer hours, and more often than now.

Types of Materials

- I want to read books translated from Japanese to English.
- There should be more books of stories which we know well, and I would go there more often.
- I want more books with famous stories.
- I would go there more often if there were books on movies and music.
- I want to read stories from famous movies, like Disney and anime.
- The books can be displayed according to levels

Tutoring and Conversation

- (I suggest) having individual tutorial time.
- I cannot speak English well, so I just say 'yes' and 'no'...I wish there was a special kind of time focussing on talking.
- I wish there was (a) special space for talking.

The above comments bring to light several important conclusions. Firstly, students have a vested interest in easier access to the RMR. Students show genuine interest in the RMR and its language related assistance, but limited accessibility and inconvenient scheduling of activities can and will diminish said interest. During the spring semester of 2016, despite being open three days a week, two of those days involved hours of operation partially overlapping with mandatory English classes. Therefore, despite being open, not a single student was able to access the RMR. With RMR assistants working part-time elsewhere, such scheduling conflicts have at times proved unavoidable; nonetheless, solutions to accessibility issues are of utmost priority.

Secondly, however rich the collection of graded readers and additional books in the RMR, if students aren't interested in the materials the chances of them benefitting from said materials diminishes. This past academic year (heeding several of the above student comments) saw the

addition of several Disney and movie-related books, as well as bilingual comics (most notably Doraemon). These new additions have proven immensely popular, and are rarely not on lend, often for both recreational and academic reading purposes. Meanwhile, the remainder of wonderful English language materials—especially the graded readers—could surely benefit from better promotion, explanation, and curriculum incorporation.

Finally, despite offering individual tutoring sessions and English conversation hours, limited RMR operational hours force an uncomfortable overlap of responsibilities for RMR assistants, which subsequently affects student opinions about participating in said events. Again, it comes down to a scheduling matter, yet efficiently delineating time between material lending, one-on-one tutoring, and conversation hours and other activities (while perhaps impossible for a single individual under the given RMR framework) needs reevaluation. Notably, student opinions regarding the scheduling of conversation hours during lunchtime need to be polled, as recent years seem to show that most freshman are loathe to sacrifice one of their few free periods to attending such sessions.

While it's clear that the coming year marks an important period of rethinking what's both possible and ideal for the RMR in the future, 2016, however, was not without some interesting additions to the RMR. The purchase of several popular board and card games, together with the initiation of a weekly game hour, has been received positively by students. Just as familiar content can reduce the burden of reading in a foreign language, games have offered students (especially more nervous students) an opportunity to participate in RMR gatherings without the persistent exhaustion of focusing on strictly conversation. Having an enjoyable focus as part of a group event, such as a board game, while in all English, works a beneficial buffer for some students to feel less pressure when interacting in English.

Also, student book recommendations, which are posted on a cork board in front of the RMR, appeared as a new staple in the fall semester of 2016. Not only does this challenge students with a light-hearted production-based language activity involving the content of what they've read, but the reviews further work as PR for the RMR itself. This proves another positive example of how student involvement in the RMR, be it related to material purchases, scheduling, or promotion, can benefit both the RMR and the students simultaneously.

Moving forward, the big issues the International Cultural Studies Department needs to contemplate concerning generating and sustaining interest in the RMR must be considered from a student point of view. No doubt personnel and budgetary matters can always throw a wrench of cruel realism into the gears of ideal thinking; however, with a period of seeming faculty and staff consistency for the coming years, now is as good a time as ever for a fresh reevaluation of the RMR. Thus, the International Cultural Studies Department has put together an RMR task force for 2017 to focus on exactly this task.

3. Rethinking the RMR

While all of the aforementioned issues require attention at one point or another, the following serves as the preliminary agenda for the RMR's evolution in its second decade of existence. More so than previously, upcoming changes stem from efforts to first and foremost address the needs and interests of current and future students in the International Cultural Studies Department as a whole, moving from offering strictly English language materials and support to Korean language materials and support as well. While English stands the only required language for students in the department, there is a healthy minority of students not only interested in Korea, but taking Korean language courses and participating in the department's summer study abroad to Korea.

Unfortunately, Korean language classes are only available outside of the International Cultural Studies Department, and opportunities for department-sponsored extracurricular, informal Korean conversation practice have similarly not existed. With the addition of a trilingual RMR assistant (Korean, English, and Japanese), offering similar extensive reading materials and academic support to students more focused on Korean study will better meet the broader interests of the department as a whole.

This new hire also comes with more RMR operational flexibility, as the department has opted for an assistant free from other part-time responsibilities, which will allow for more student-friendly scheduling from semester-to-semester. That said, the matter of after-hours accessibility to popular materials also needs to come under the radar. The realities of the departmental budget dictate relatively shorter hours of operation for the RMR (6-8 hours a week), and even with the aforementioned increase in scheduling flexibility, the hope for greater assistant-to-student interaction through tutoring and conversation sessions cannot be understated. One possible option for offering more interactivity and socialization would require an alternative, after-hours route for students to borrow and return materials. While such a conversation will eventually lead to dicey issues regarding the responsibilities of library material management, the difficulty of such a conversation should not stymie faculty from attempting to think outside-the-box on this matter in service of the student body as a whole. E-books and other digital materials (including materials for extensive listening) could be a start.

As for the RMR library materials themselves, student feedback and borrowing histories make it clear that certain materials are in demand, while others might be with the proper presentation and explanation. 2017 will see an increase in purchases of bilingual books, beginning with already popular

comics such as Doraemon and Snoopy, and moving into samples of other genres to gauge student interest. Of course, while student-friendly improvements are a priority, the English faculty should also pay proper mind to the present and future materials library of the RMR when restructuring the foreign language curriculum for the following academic year.

Ultimately, beginning the reevaluation of the RMR from a student perspective, however, allows for students to be part of the rebranding of the RMR's image. Not only will positive feedback on the part of the students spread the more positive impression of the RMR via word of mouth, but more opportunities for students to collaborate with the RMR in promoting various aspects of the RMR's library and activities (such as with the book recommendations that began last year) would provide invaluable PR. More student usage, in turn, leads to more potential application of the RMR in foreign language and cultural education within the department. More potential means more support, which could mean more financial backing, that in turn benefitting teachers and students alike. That dreamy potential, however, begins with more frequent student usage, and thus, initial reevaluation from a student point of view cannot be ignored.

As for the matter of the extensive reading program together with which the RMR was created, the reality of a well-developed program with solid pedagogical foundations demands uninhibited access to reading materials and an accessible structure of support for students. The frequent faculty and staff turnovers during the past few years, inconvenient hours of operation for the RMR, and unclear program objectives paint the picture of an extensive reading program alive in a motivational sense but struggling to find concrete definition. With luck, a more student-friendly RMR will transition the conversation around the improvement of the RMR to the next stage of how a well-defined extensive reading program may serve the International Cultural Studies Department's students and curriculum.

4. Conclusion

Over the past decade, the RMR has offered students and faculty alike opportunities to raise both motivation for and the level of English language education in the International Cultural Studies Department. With the breadth of English language materials ranging from EFL-student-focused graded readers to popular international fashion magazines, the RMR houses resources adaptable to the eclectic interests and varying proficiency levels of the department's student body.

However, budgetary constraints and a lack of continuity among the administrative body of the RMR has meant less than

ideal operation of the RMR, most especially from a student perspective. While a fair number of students from year to year have nonetheless maintained a vested interest in frequenting the RMR for homework help, informal conversation, borrowing books, preparing for standardized tests, and more, it is clear that the International Cultural Studies Department as a whole can be better served by the RMR; thus, it is time to rethink the RMR's primary objectives.

The initial step in the evolution towards a more department-friendly RMR comes in its transition to a multilingual resource and support center. No longer solely focused on English, the RMR will expand its aims to Korean as well, looking to meet the academic needs and interests of a wider range of students. RMR extracurricular activities have often aimed to serve students preparing to visit the U.S. on the department's summer study abroad program, but now equal attention can be devoted to those traveling to Korea as well.

Finally, the need to involve students in not only improving the RMR's library, activities, and scheduling, but also in its promotion, cannot be overstated. While student feedback on the RMR has been sought in the past, several suggestions and concerns have gone ignored. The founding pedagogical objectives laid out for the RMR in 2006 came via faculty initiation, and while worthy objectives no doubt, the realities of RMR usage in 2016 show that simply re-espousing the same objectives without student input may unfortunately limit the RMR as intriguing to perhaps only a niche community of students. What is to be done about a curriculum-supported extensive reading program shall wait to be seen. For the immediate future, a focus beyond just English under more flexible, student-friendly operation is where to begin in 2017.

5. References

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