High Performance ER in a Japanese University: *Yes, They Can!*

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Reference Data

Following the challenges and successes realized in the 2016 launch of this new 2-year-long extensive reading (ER) program in the English department of one private Japanese women's university (Koby, 2017a), this paper highlights the design, implementation, and results of a new 2nd-year program and an improved 1st-year program that require students to read at least 540,000 words over the course of 4 semesters. A comparison of the reading volume and patterns of the 2016 and 2017 cohorts identified clear improvements that indicate several of the students in the newer class are on track to read far in excess of 1,000,000 words over the program's duration. After discussing changes made to the 1st-year curriculum structure and teacher behavior in the 2017-18 academic year, the authors introduce some activities included in the 1st- and 2nd-year classes—speed-reading drills and Bibliobattles—that augmented the core curriculum at the heart of this ambitious ER program.

日本の私立女子大学の英文学科で2016年に開始したこの新しい 2 年間の多読（ER）プログラムの課題と成功を受け（Koby, 2017a）、本論では、4学期中に最低54万語を読むことを学生に課した新しい2年目のERプログラムと改善された1年目のプログラムの計画、実現とその結果をまとめる。2016年と2017年の学生の読書量とパターンを比較すると、このプログラム期間内に100万語をはるかに超えて読み進めそうな学生が、新年度のクラスに数人いることを示す明確な改善が確認されている。本稿では、2017-18年度の 1 年生向けのカリキュラム構造と教師自身の行動に対する変遷を論じた後、この野心的なERプログラムの中心にあるコアカリキュラムに増補された、スピード・リーディングとビブリオバトルという1年生と2年生のクラスに導入されたアクティビティを紹介していく。

Extensive reading (ER) is a well-established approach to facilitate and encourage L2 acquisition (Waring & McLean, 2015). It has proven effective at improving not only reading proficiency (Jeon & Day, 2016), but also the performance of L2 learners on TOEIC (Nishizawa, Yoshioka, & Fukada, 2010). At Miyagi Gakuin Women's University, all students in the English department, who enter with TOEIC scores averaging around 390 points, study in a compulsory ER program in the 1st and 2nd years. This new four-semester ER program was launched in the 2016-17 academic year, as detailed in Koby (2017a). In this paper, we build on the prior course description and describe changes made in light of the analyses of results from the 2016-17 academic year.

In designing this ER program, much attention was paid to the ten principles established in the seminal guide many ER practitioners consider essential in ER program administration (Day & Bamford, 2002):

1. The reading material is easy.
2. A variety of reading material on a wide range of topics must be available.
3. Learners choose what they want to read.
4. Learners read as much as possible.
5. The purpose of reading is usually related to pleasure, information and general understanding.
6. Reading is its own reward.
7. Reading speed is usually faster rather than slower.
8. Reading is individual and silent.
9. Teachers orient and guide their students.
10. The teacher is a role model of a reader. (pp. 136-141)

We have attempted to incorporate as many of the principles as possible, specifically Principles 1, 2, 3, 4, 7, 8, and 9. We believe that our program also adheres to the spirit of Principle 5, but would suggest a single word, *purpose*, be replaced with "focus" as our reading is required as part of the university's curriculum. Additionally, because the reading is required, and grades earned, it is impossible for our program to adhere to Principle 6. The 10th principle, as Day (2017) has confirmed, is the least frequently practiced principle from the list and simply not practical in our program and classroom setting. We are satisfied that our program closely follows more than the essential five principles identified in Jeon and Day (2015) as "key or core to any ER program whose goal is to improve L2 reading proficiency" (p. 302).

After first describing the updated structure of the 1st-year syllabus and reasons for changes made, student performance from the first semester and one third of the second semester of 2017-18 will be presented and discussed. Additionally, the structure and procedure for our inaugural 2nd-year cohort will be explained, including results of an end-of-program questionnaire.

As will be shown, there is some disparity in the results of the 1st- and 2nd-year students in this 2nd year of our program. The students in our 2nd-year cohort were engaged in both last year's and this year's trial-and-error attempt at establishing an effective ER program. After reflecting upon our inaugural-year results, we adjusted our 1st-year syllabus and classroom management. As the difference in reading outcomes shows, these changes positively impacted both the attitudes and performance of our freshmen. Our conclusions will address the issues we found with our 2nd-year syllabus and set the stage for what we expect will be a dramatically improved second attempt at a successful 2nd-year program.

Reading Management

As reported in detail previously (Koby, 2017a, 2017b), our students and instructors make use of an ER-specific learner management system (LMS) called *Xreading* (www.xreading.com). Keeping track and, arguably more importantly, verifying actual student reading of our extensive readers is an arduous task made simple and hassle-free with the employment of *Xreading.* Not only does *Xreading* provide comprehension quizzes (currently about 6,500) for our collection of paper-based graded readers, but it also offers an online library of over 1,000 titles that students can access simultaneously. We opted for *Xreading* over another excellent and fee-free quiz administration and reading management platform, *MReader*, which also offers the aforementioned 6,500 quizzes, because of the e-book access. Considering the large volume of reading our program requires, it was determined that the paper books we had on hand were not sufficient to meet our needs.

The convenient access to student records that *Xreading* provides allows our instructors to vigilantly monitor student progress, which is critical in a program like ours that puts high reading demands on its students. Additionally, data can be extrapolated for analysis. Thus, *Xreading* has proven invaluable to the successful management of our program.

The 1st-Year Cohort
High Performance Reading Requirements
Based on the success of the prior year, as measured by 100% of the students successfully reading the required volume in both the first and second semesters (70,000 words and 90,000 words, respectively), it was felt that an increase in the requirements could be managed by subsequent cohorts, particularly when coupled with our intention to provide more focused support by the instructor.

Table 1 contains the upgraded reading requirements for the 2017 cohort, which call for an overall reading minimum of 540,000 words over the four semesters to achieve a minimum passing grade of 50% and a top threshold minimum of nearly 1.2 million words to earn the maximum of 80%. The remaining 20% of the grade is based on in-class activities such as student-to-teacher reading aloud and overall class participation. Nishizawa et al. (2010) established a preliminary threshold of 300,000 words where TOEIC improvements were measured; therefore, it was our intention in setting our reading requirements that the majority of our students would demonstrate improvements within their 1st year. As all our students take the TOEIC test annually, we will soon be able to ascertain whether this goal was met.

One important change we made to the 1st-year syllabus was adding a weekly reading minimum, which we set at 3,000 words for the first semester. In our inaugural year, we observed rather irregular reading patterns in many of our students, which seemed contrary to the philosophy at the root of ER that suggests that over the course of an ER program students should increase their reading level, speed, and volume (Waring & McLean, 2015).

Table 1. Reading Volume (in Words) Required of the 2017-18 Cohort

Grade	Semester 1	Semester 2	Semester 3	Semester 4	TOTAL
50%	90,000	120,000	150,000	180,000	540,000
55%	105,000	135,000	170,000	200,000	610,000
60%	125,000	150,000	190,000	220,000	685,000
65%	150,000	170,000	215,000	230,000	775,000
70%	175,000	195,000	240,000	260,000	920,000
75%	210,000	225,000	270,000	300,000	1,050,000
80%	250,000	270,000	300,000	340,000	1,160,000

Building a Strong Foundation

We believe that the single most critical aspect of creating a successful ER program is establishing a positive and supportive environment in which students engage in a culture of reading achievement. Our new students experience a 3-week orientation during which they are gradually exposed to, and indoctrinated into, the wonderful world of ER. The demands of our program seem daunting at first to students, but the enthusiasm and support demonstrated by our program leader (and lead author) convince even the most reluctant readers that they *can* read the mountain of books in front of them.

The first semester is mainly focused on establishing positive reading habits, with much of the class time dedicated to silent sustained reading (SSR). Students are taught how to select appropriate material at or below their reading ability, which allows them to read at a relatively fast rate and successfully read several short stories in rapid succession, building confidence and reading skills in tandem.

During the SSR period, students meet individually with the teacher weekly to review their recent performance and allow the teacher to provide support where necessary. This continues for more than half the semester until the students develop independence and need less direct support. Those that are performing well are then left to develop independently; weekly meetings focus more on students in need, as well as specific issues that may arise with the use of our LMS.

Finally, during the last half of the first semester, students are asked to read aloud to the instructor. Through this experience student and instructor can build better rapport, and the instructor can provide positive and constructive feedback to assist students' reading and speaking fluency and comprehension. This interaction provides opportunities to give individualized support to students, such as advising on decoding errors and challenges, focusing on pronunciation idiosyncrasies, and instructing students to read in chunks rather than individual words. To the students, ostensibly the task is attached to the 20% classroom assessment component.

The 2nd-Year Cohort
Overview

The 2nd-year cohort of ER students were assigned a different grading scale in the third semester than they had been given in the 1st year of study. In order to pass the class, students were required to read a semester minimum total of 115,000 words. In addition, students were given a weekly minimum of 5,000 words that would impact up to 20% of their final grade. Students would lose 2% from this 20% for any week they did not meet the minimum and would receive the full 20% if they read the minimum each week for the entire 15-week semester.

In the fourth semester, reading minimums were removed entirely from the grading process for several reasons. First, the instructor was concerned that reading minimums were undermining the true nature of ER for the students, putting pressure on students and forcing them to view books as a means to an end rather than a source of enjoyment. Second, the vast majority of classroom time in the third semester was spent with the instructor personally counseling each student individually, speaking to them about weekly performances. This is a valid and meaningful use of time, but the instructor sought to redistribute this time toward other in-class activities. The 20% of the final grade that was put toward these minimums was thus used instead for rewarding performance during in-class activities. Two activities were introduced in the 2nd year: speed reading drills in the third semester and a Bibliobattle curriculum throughout the fourth semester.

Speed Reading Drill and Measurement Tool

The speed reading drill and measurement tool was designed for two reasons. The first and most important purpose was to create a learning tool that would drill students in improving reading speed and comprehension through repeated timed readings with visual representation of the target reading speed. The second purpose was to create a measurement tool that would capture students' reading speeds and accuracy on a weekly basis over the course of the semester.
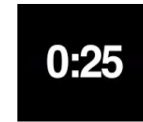
The speed reading tool was designed in PowerPoint. Each presentation consists of three slides. The first slide is a title slide that is displayed to indicate preparation time. At this stage, students change seats to sit close to the projector screen, as they are usually scattered around the room during silent reading. The room lights are dimmed, and students have their smartphones available for the speed reading quiz.

The second slide (see Figure 1 for a mock-up) contains three elements: a timer in the top-left corner that counts upward from 0 minutes and 0 seconds, a block of scrolling text that takes up the majority of the screen, and a small rabbit character that animates down the left edge of the screen. The timer is a preproduced movie element of which there are many to be found for free on the Internet. The timer begins at "0:00" and starts clocking the time as soon as the instructor advances the presentation to this slide; students begin reading at this point.

A new text was used for each weekly iteration of the drill. The texts were controlled to be consistent for reading level and length. A readable-size text resulted in approximately half of the total text being displayed on the projection, so the text block was set to scroll slowly upwards and off the screen, revealing the lower half of the text block. The text eases into the scrolling movement so as to give adequate display time to the beginning part of the text block.

The rabbit element is a free clip-art rabbit that begins at the top-left corner of the slide, then slowly animates downward such that the rabbit's position and movement visualizes a reading speed of 100 words per minute (wpm). Students are instructed to try to "beat the rabbit," which encourages them to read at a constant pace of over 100 wpm while providing them with a constant visualization of where in the text a reader would be if they[1] were maintaining that pace.

The final slide displays a quick response (QR) code that sends students to a Google Surveys form. Each iteration of the drill has a separate form linked with a unique QR code. Students respond to several accuracy assessment questions, provide their final reading time (the time displayed on the counter when the student reaches the end of the text), and mark whether or not they were able to read at a faster pace than the moving rabbit. Student responses are gathered through Google Surveys, which allows the data to be accessed and downloaded quickly for processing.

The second slide contains three elements—a timer in the top-left corner that counts upward from zero minutes and zero seconds, a block of scrolling text that takes up the majority of the screen, and a small rabbit character that animates down the left edge of the screen. The timer begins at "0:00" and starts clocking the time as soon as the instructor advances the presentation to this slide. Students begin reading at this point. A new text was used for each weekly iteration of the drill. The texts were controlled to be consistent for reading level and length. A readable size text resulted in approximately half of the total text

Figure 1. Mock-up of the speed-reading tool.

Bibliobattle

"Bibliobattle is a social book review game which was developed in the Graduate School of Informatics at Kyoto University in Japan" (Bibliobattle, n.d.). This game, originally designed by Tadahiro Taniguchi, is centered on reader presentations and includes elements of extemporaneous speech, book reviews, and vote-based competition. The official rules are as follows:

1. Come together with a favorite or an interesting book.
2. Introduce your favorite book for 5 minutes one by one.
3. After each presentation, we'll talk about the book for about 3 minutes with all participants.
4. After all presentations, the best book will be elected by vote of all participants, both audience and presenters. The criterion is "a book which you want to read most." We call this book the "Champion Book of the Day" (*Champ-bon* in Japanese; Bibliobattle, n.d.)

Students in the 2nd-year ER program participated in standard 5-minute individual Bibliobattles as well as team-based Bibliobattles. Students were instructed to select a book they enjoyed from the books they had read during the first few weeks of the ER class. They were shown several demonstration Bibliobattle videos and provided with a list of useful phrases for discussing books and stories. Students then participated in small (three- to four-student) group Bibliobattles, and each group chose a Champ-bon from within their group. This book became the book that the small group then used to prepare and conduct a group presentation the following week. Each group presented together as if they were an individual presenter in the Bibliobattle, and the class voted on a final Champ-bon at the end of all the group presentations. This novel style of "Two-round Team Bibliobattle" was conducted to acclimatize the students to the Bibliobattle presentation style in a low-stress group atmosphere. Over the following weeks, standard Bibliobattles were conducted each week; three or four students were selected randomly for each week's battle. After each set of presentations, the entire class voted on that week's Champ-bon.

Bibliobattle and its application in the ER classroom have been discussed extensively in Maclauchlan (2018), including an analysis of student reactions to the exercise. A summary of that analysis is included in the results section.

Results

Analysis of student reading data in the *Xreading* LMS, speed reading data, and the survey provided to 2nd-year students following their semester doing Bibliobattle yielded several valuable insights into how the changes enacted by the instructors affected student behavior, performance, and attitude.

In three and a half semesters, our 2016 cohort have read a mean value of approximately 404,000 words (Figure 2). However, changes to our program structure and administration in the second year have yielded significant improvements. Data in Figure 3 suggest that students in our 2017 cohort are on track to read a significantly higher number of words, on average, than the class that came before; in the first one and a half semesters, they have already read an average of 216,000 words.
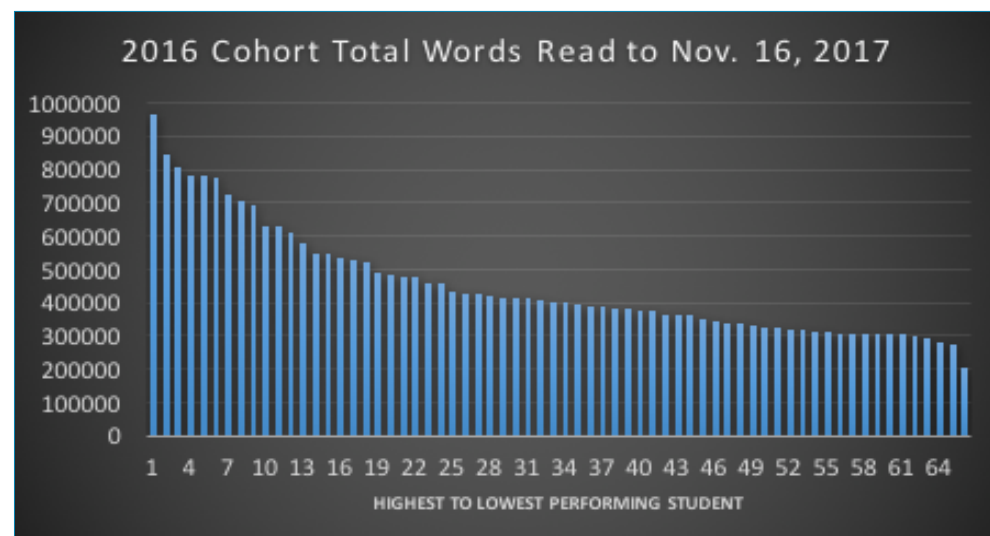

Figure 2. Total words read by 2016 cohort students over 3.5 semesters.
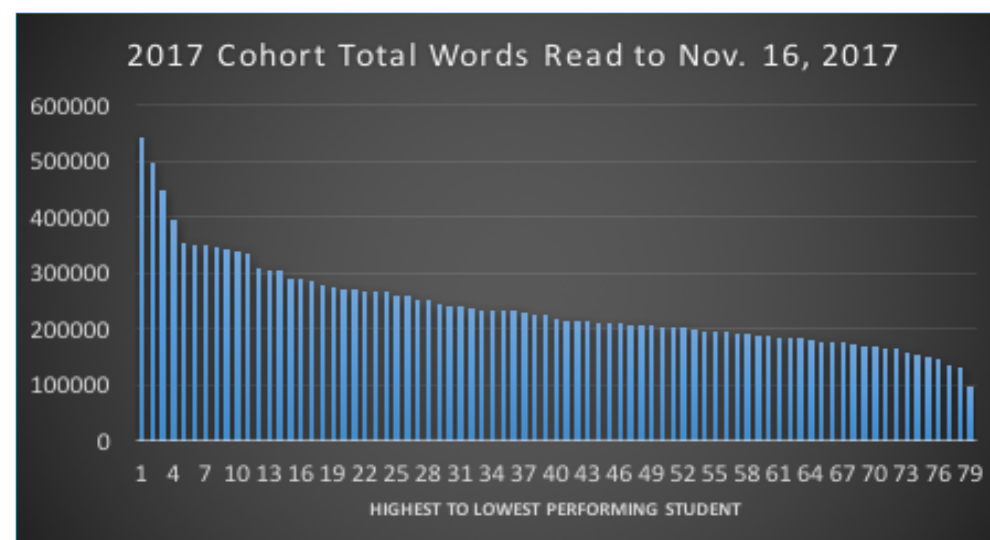

Figure 3. Total words read by 2017 cohort students over 1.5 semesters.

As Figure 4 shows, in their first semester, our students read an average of nearly 1,500 English words *every day* throughout the semester. The data reveal an emerging difference in patterns between the first and second cohorts. Although the first (2016) cohort achieved impressive gains in their daily reading averages from the first 5-week period to the second, there was a drop-off in the final third of the semester, particularly with students who had achieved a minimum passing grade. Closer inspection of individual reading patterns confirmed an en-masse drop-off for those who had read well in the early weeks and a significant spike, suggesting binge reading, in the final weeks for students who had lagged behind earlier. Furthermore, in the 2016 cohort, a massive drop-off in reading occurred from the end of the first to the beginning of the second semester. This phenomenon was significantly reduced with the 2017 cohort as we implemented weekly minimum reading requirements at the start of the 2017-18 academic year for both grades.
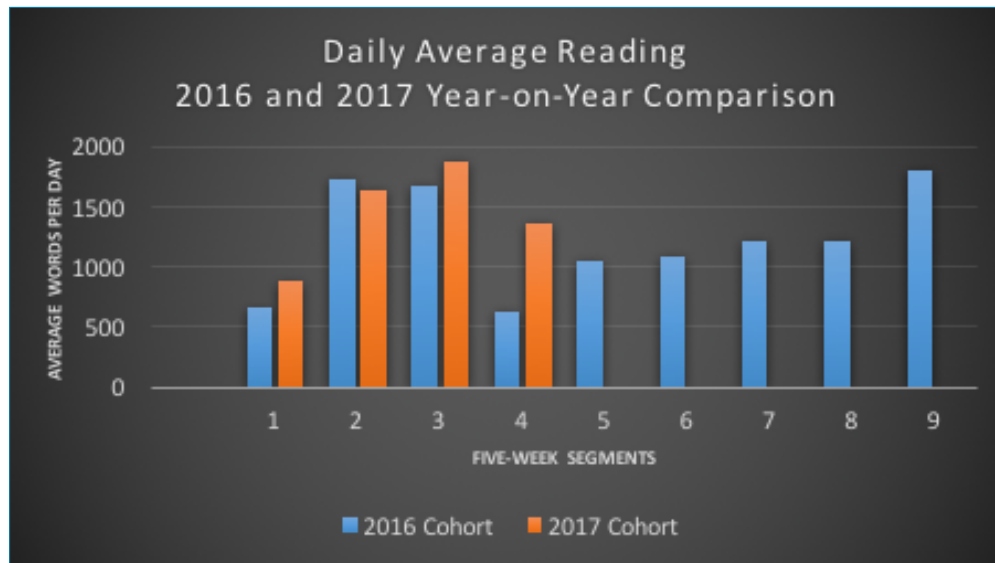

Figure 4. Average daily reading of first and second cohorts, measured in 5-week segments.

It was found that creating a minimum weekly word-count requirement in the third semester negatively affected student performance outcomes in one major aspect. This change to the grading system inadvertently anchored students to the 5,000-word minimum; many students simply met this minimum for multiple weeks during the semester. Although it was presented to the students as an absolute minimum, it apparently served as a target for many students. This stood as a hindrance to overall reading performance, particularly as an average of 7,700 words per week was necessary to reach the minimum 115,000 words required to pass the semester. Students eventually understood this and read heavily in the later weeks to meet the requirements, but the goal of cultivating a more regular and habitual reading pattern was not achieved.

The lack of minimums in the fourth semester resulted in reading patterns even further from the goal of weekly habitual reading, with many lower level students reading nothing at all for several weeks and leaving the entirety of the semester's required reading until the last weeks of the semester. As a result, the expected lower stress levels and higher enjoyment through reading did not occur. When asked directly about the weekly minimum word counts at the end of the course, many students suggested they should be reinstated to help them keep pace with the reading requirements. In addition, several students did not feel that removing minimums encouraged students to read more enjoyably and naturally.

Speed reading drills yielded a large collection of data on reading speeds and accuracy measured over the course of the semester. The data for the entire 2nd-year cohort ($n = 60$) is displayed in Figure 5.

Average reading speed for students increased from 118 wpm to 150 wpm over the 15-week semester. This increase in reading speed for students in the 2nd-year ER program over the course of their third semester was statistically significant (two-tailed t test, $p < .00001$). Attributing causation to the overall ER program or the effects of the speed reading drills is problematic because of the multitude of other factors that could have influenced our students' performance. However, it seems highly probable that our program, with the speed reading drills, positively impacted reading speed gains over the semester. Furthermore, it is notable that average reading speed for the students far outpaced the goal of 100 wpm and the onscreen movement of the pace-keeping rabbit.
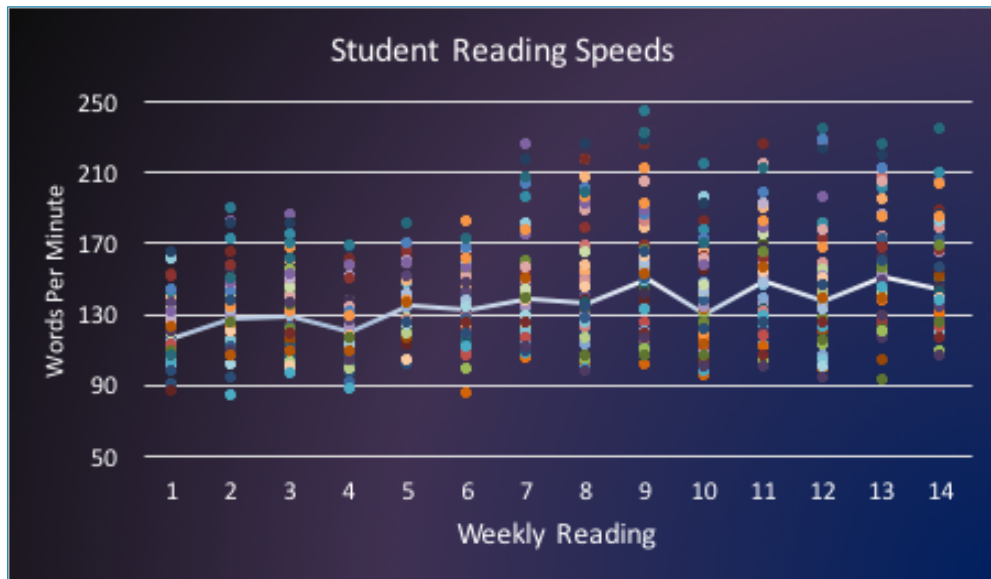
Figure 5. 2nd-year student reading speeds measured over the first semester, with colored dots representing individual students and the connecting line indicating the mean.

At semester end, an online survey was administered to the 2nd-year students using Google Forms to collect feedback on the use of Bibliobattle and the course in general. It contained 11 five-point Likert-scale items about Bibliobattle and five general questions, plus a final open-ended item (see Appendix). Bibliobattle and its effects in our program are detailed in Maclauchlan (2018). However, the major findings show mixed results:

- The majority of students did not consider Bibliobattle enjoyable and found it difficult to perform such a speaking-centric activity in a reading class.
- The majority of students believe that Bibliobattle was valuable in their English studies.
- Students did not strongly agree or disagree with the statement that Bibliobattles improved class atmosphere.
- The majority of students confirmed that learning about different books through Bibliobattles helped them with their ER.
- Nine out of 60 students considered Bibliobattles to be a waste of time, although over half of the students indicated they disagreed with this statement.

- Additional open responses ranged from praising Bibliobattle as "very meaningful" to dismissing it as "a lot of trouble."

Conclusion

From the results of this current year, we have learned that requiring a minimum number of words each week is an essential ingredient in fostering student success in our program. Because one of the core objectives of ER is to increase reading speed and fluency, we will implement minimum weekly word requirements that increase each week, thus "nudging" our students to increase their speed and volume. We believe that habit forming at the very start of our program is critical to its success, so we place a much greater emphasis on the habits of our students rather than on the achievement of specific end goals (Galla & Duckworth, 2015).

Speed reading activities have proven to be useful supplements to our program, and we will continue with them with both 1st- and 2nd-year students. Additionally, Bibliobattles have provided our 2nd-year students with opportunities to connect more deeply with the reading material, so we are looking at ways to improve this component of our program.

We are encouraged by the positive results of our program that we have observed thus far, particularly with the second cohort, and will continue to adjust the details while maintaining what we believe is a solid core of principles and practices, following Day and Bamford (2002), at the heart of our design.

Note

1. In this paper, we have chosen to use the pronouns *they* and *them* as singular pronouns of indeterminate gender.

Bio Data

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Appendix
Bibliobattle and Extensive Reading End-of-Semester Survey (Maclauchlan, 2018)

Students were given a 17-item questionnaire consisting of 16 statements employing a 5-point Likert scale to determine their impressions regarding Bibliobattles in the ER classroom. The response options were written in Japanese with the following values:

1. 全く同意できない   [Strongly disagree]
2. 同意できない   [Disagree]
3. どちらともいえない   [Neither agree or disagree]
4. 同意できる   [Agree]
5. 非常に同意できる   [Strongly agree]

Each item is shown in translated English followed by the original Japanese that was used in the questionnaire.

Item 1:   *I am glad I took the ER class.*
多読の授業を受けて良かったと思っています。

Item 2:   *I believe the ER class is valuable for English study.*
多読の授業は英語の勉強の役に立つと思います。

Item 3:   *I enjoy reading books.*
本を読む事が好きです。

Item 4:   *I enjoy Bibliobattle.*
Bibliobattleが楽しいと思っています。

Item 5:   *I believe Bibliobattle is valuable for my studies.*
Bibliobattleが勉強の役に立つと思います。

Item 6:   *I believe having a speaking activity included in a reading class is difficult to deal with.*
読書の授業の中で、Bibliobattleという話す活動があってやりづらいと思います。

Item 7:   *The class atmosphere improved with the inclusion of Bibliobattles.*
Bibliobattleでクラスの雰囲気がより良くなりました。

Item 8:   *Learning about many different books in Bibliobattles helped me with my extensive reading.*

Bibliobattleで色んな本を知り、多読の役に立ちました。

Item 9:   *I wish that we would have had more time to read in class instead of doing Bibliobattles.*

授業中にBibliobattleをやるより、読む時間を増やせば良かったと思います。

Item 10:   *I think Bibliobattles were a waste of time.*

Bibliobattleは時間の無駄だったと思います。

Item 11:   *I discovered a book I want to read next because of Bibliobattle.*

Bibliobattleで次に読みたくなる本と出会いました。

Item 12:   *I liked the group activity of the Team Bibliobattle.*

Team Bibliobattleのグループ活動が良かったと思います。

Item 13:   *I got used to talking about books by doing Bibliobattles.*

Bibliobattleで、本について話す事に慣れました。

Item 14:   *I got used to talking about books by doing Bibliobattles and began to talk with my friends about books more often.*

Bibliobattleで、本について話す事に慣れて、友達と本について話す事が多くなりました。

Item 15:   *Always worrying about word counts takes the fun out of reading.*

語数をいつも心配して、本を読む事が楽しくなくなります。

Item 16:   *I read at least one hour each week.*

毎週1時間以上読んでいます。

The final item of the survey was an open-ended question asking respondents to provide feedback on their experiences and impressions of the ER program, the teacher, and Bibliobattles in the classroom. The following responses were translated from Japanese to English by the author:

- I felt a higher sense of motivation to do my best through listening to friends' Bibliobattle presentations.
- Mr. Kyle is a kind and positive teacher, so there is always a good and enjoyable atmosphere in the classroom. However, adding Bibliobattles led to a loss of reading time.
- I borrowed my Bibliobattle book from the library, but the books have to be returned. Not being called to present for several weeks meant I had to borrow and return the book over and over again, which was a lot of trouble.
- I learned from the Bibliobattles, but there was also a lot of trouble. I wish we had been told the order of presenters.
- Bibliobattles, I think it should be decided which students will present in the next class. Feeling nervous up until the moment right before the presentations is a little stressful.
- When students responded to [presenters'] "Hello, everyone!" during the Bibliobattles, Mr. Kyle's expression was cute.
- I like Mr. Kyle, very much. However, I don't like to reading activities class, now.
- I don't want to do Bibliobattles again.
- The Bibliobattles were a lot of trouble and kept me from enjoying the class.
- Bibliobattle takes me out of my comfort zone, so it's good to do it sometimes.
- I wish there was more time to read in class.
- I would like a little more time to read in class. I prefer the individual *Bibliobattles* to the group battles.
- I enjoy doing Bibliobattle, but it's hard for me to do it.
- I don't like speaking in front of people, so Bibliobattle was very difficult, but I'm glad I did it one time.
- I believe doing Bibliobattle was very meaningful.
- If we could use PowerPoint in Bibliobattles, we could do presentations without looking at notes.
- ER is very effective for TOEFL and TOEIC study, I hope to continue working hard on it.
- ER helped me increase the number of words and phrases I'm able to use.
- I think that extensive reading is fun.
- I don't like read the book.
- I will try to read more books!
- I would like more books about movies and foreign dramas.
- I want to read foreign drama books. There are some online, but I want to read physical books.
- I enjoy reading