

# Battle of the books: creative literacy ideas for first and second language learners

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**Michelle Wardrip**

Head Librarian

English Modern School, Doha Campus

Qatar

[michelle.wardrip@gmail.com](mailto:michelle.wardrip@gmail.com)

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Most of my teaching career has been spent in American schools, most recently as a Teacher-Librarian at an English-Spanish elementary school. My international teaching career began in Qatar in August of 2012, when I started my new job as a Teacher-Librarian at a private K-12 school. My first year was spent rearranging the library's collection and getting a feel for the school, its students and staff. By the end of the second term of the first year, I realized that the most important aspect of my job as a school librarian was going to be improving the literacy skills of my students. How to do this was my next problem and I immediately thought of the Battle of the Books (BOB) Program. My school district in Oregon had used it in seventeen elementary schools, both regular and bilingual. This was exactly what I needed because I was currently teaching in a bilingual school (English/Arabic). I went about getting support from my primary and secondary school teachers and administration. Once I had the support in place, I needed to take a closer look at how we had run the BOB Program in Oregon and then adapt it to my current situation. The things that I needed to consider in order to make the BOB Program a success were the following:

1. Deciding which year levels would participate for the Primary and Secondary Divisions
2. Selecting the reading levels for each division
3. Deciding the number of books for each division to read
4. Selecting the right books for the each division
5. Making a Timeline
6. Deciding the format of the questions
7. Writing the questions
8. Setting up the tournament
9. Using Guest Readers during the tournament for each division
10. Rewards for the winning teams of both divisions

To understand the complexities of how this was going to work in an English-Arabic environment, it helps to understand how the BOB Program works and a bit of its history. It has been in existence for over thirty years in America in one form or another. It is also being used around the world in a variety of formats. The basic premise of the program is to get students excited about reading by participating in a competition. Students get together to

create a team of four, read a certain number of books within a specified time frame and then participate in a tournament by trying to answer a question from each book. The team with the greatest amount of points is the winner.

What makes this program useful for getting students enthusiastic about reading is the fact that they don't have to do this by themselves. With team participation, students have less anxiety about their reading level, especially for students who are not good readers. Shy students will participate because they don't have to speak up or be the team leader. They can contribute by simply discussing the question with the team and having the team Spokesperson give the answer. Letting students develop their own teams also motivates them to be a part of the competition. With the support of the classroom teacher and the Teacher-Librarian, they can steer students with lower reading abilities to combine with students who have higher reading abilities to make a team, which makes students more comfortable in participating.

The first step was to decide which year levels would participate. I could not proceed to Step Two until I had made this decision since it would tell me what reading levels I needed to choose. For the Primary Division, I went with YR 4-6, which translates to grades 3-5. This was the same grade level of students that I had used BOB with back in the States. I knew that their reading levels would give me a good selection of books from which to choose. For the Secondary Division, it would be YR 7-9, which translates to grades 6-8. I chose these year levels because they were the year level of the students that I saw for Library Media lessons every other week. I hoped that during the second year of BOB, I would be able to expand the Secondary Division to include YR 10 (grade 9).

Step Two was selecting the reading level of the books for the Primary and Secondary Divisions. At our campus in Doha, we use the Fountas and Pinnell (F & P) System to level our books. All students in the Primary School are tested using the Developmental Reading Assessment 2 (DRA2) guidelines which we then convert to an F & P level. The DRA2 assesses students on their strengths and weaknesses in regards to their reading ability and fluency. Knowing that I would not be able to accommodate all the student reading levels for the Primary Division, I decided to use a range from level L to Q. This would eliminate the very lowest readers but it would still make it available to most of the students. I also could not include books for the highest level students as this would prevent most of the other students from being able to participate. This is the biggest problem when you have a wide discrepancy of reading levels. For the Secondary Division, I decided on Level Q to W. I chose these because I knew the reading level of my middle school students. I also knew the ones who would be most interested in the contest would be the better readers. If I went too low, I would risk losing all the good readers because they would not be challenged.

Step Three was deciding how many books would be on the list for each division to read. In looking back to what I had done in the States, I decided that we would do 10 books for each division. I felt that eight titles were not enough and 12 were too many. If each team divided up the books to read between their members that would mean each person would need to read three books. That seemed a reasonable number when I thought about our student population and their reading skills. The more books each team member reads, the better the team will do in the competition. For example, if only one student has read the book, then they

are the only one who will be able to answer the question. If two students on the team have read the same book, then they can confer and decide on the correct answer.

Step Four was to choose the right books for the two divisions. I tried to include as many genres as possible but it became apparent that the lower reading levels would eliminate some of my choices. I also did not choose books that had strange names in them because I knew from experience that it would be hard for my students to understand and pronounce. I settled on Realistic Fiction, Fantasy, and Mystery genres for the Primary Division. The titles that I chose reflected strong boy and girl protagonists. I also made sure to include two titles that were from the Scholastic Classroom Libraries that each teacher had in their room. This would help with the cost of buying multiple copies of each title and allow students to be able to read some of the BOB books from their classroom library. I tried to find a non-fiction book for the Primary Division but I was unsuccessful. The title that I wanted about recycling was out of print and not even available on Amazon. I also ended up eliminating *Rickshaw Girl* by Matali Perkins because the reading level was a bit too high. For the Secondary Division, I settled on Realistic Fiction, Fantasy, Biography and Non-fiction. I did manage to include one non-fiction title in this division which was *Sea Otter Rescue* by Roland Smith. At only 64 pages, it was short enough that it wouldn't take them forever to read and it was something that would be of interest to them. I also included a favorite book in this division which was *Matilda* by Roald Dahl. Sometimes you just have to stack the deck to get more students interested.

Step Five would be deciding on a timeline. I had to include: talking about the BOB contest since it was a new library program, handing out and collecting the permission slips, making bookmarks to distribute from the library, setting a starting date for the students to begin reading, and a date for the tournament to start. Once I had the timeline figured out, the rest fell into place. I started my talk about the BOB program in October and then distributed permission slips. Once those were turned in, students were allowed to checkout BOB books and start reading. I decided that participants would have until the middle of February to get as many books read and then the tournament would start. I wanted each team to play three rounds before eliminations would start. From there, I would take the top eight scoring teams and go on to the quarter finals, using a typical Bracket Play Structure often used in sports events. This time each team would play two rounds before they were eliminated. Then to the semi-final and the final round, where the top two teams would play each other for the Championship. It took us six weeks to finish the tournament which was too long because the students were starting to lose interest. I made a note that next year we would need to shorten the time frame. One other change I made for the next year was that students would not be permitted to checkout BOB books until they had a team of four. Too many students started reading the books and didn't bother with getting a team together. It really created havoc when it was time to get team names and members only to find out that students didn't have a complete team.

Step Six turned out to be one of the most important. I needed to decide the format of the questions. It could either be "Content", "In Which Book" (IWB) or a combination of both. For Content questions, this would mean asking for basic information such as: Name of the main character(s), age, where the story took place, and specific incidents in the book that were related to the main character(s). If I wanted to use IWB questions, where the title and author's name must be given, this meant the question would need to be phrased differently. An example would be: In which book did the main characters go into their backyard and

travel back in time? The answer would be *Dragon of the Red Dawn* by Mary Pope Osborne. When questions like these are used, it can be very easy for students to guess the answer. This is especially true if the book is a biography or another type of non-fiction book. That was one of the major concerns of the Teacher-Librarians back in the States. They felt it was too easy for the students to answer IWB questions. The first few years we did BOB back in my old district we used only Content questions. We then switched to a combination of Content and IWB because this was the format chosen for the Oregon Battle of the Books. It is a very similar contest but used more book titles and was Oregon-based. We wanted to align our format so it matched OBOB since many schools were doing both programs. For my school in Doha, I decided to use only Content questions.

Step Seven involved writing the questions. If a question is written incorrectly, students will not know how to answer. This is especially true for students who are English Language Learners. One thing that I found out in Qatar is that our students take what you say very literally. How you phrase a question is of the utmost importance. Once the questions are written, someone needs to edit them to make sure they make sense. For example, one of the questions for a book was written, "What reason did Sarah give for crying?" A better way to write it would have been "What reason did Sarah give for crying on George's shoulder?" The first year I had several teachers at the Primary and Secondary level who volunteered to read a book and write the questions and answers. I sent them sample questions and a template so they would know what to do. Unfortunately I still had awkwardly phrased questions and answers. Questions need to be as specific as possible but should not include too much detail. There really is an art to writing a good question. The person editing the questions should also have a copy of the book near at hand so they can check the wording of the question and answer, and the page where the answer is found. Sometimes the people who write the questions make a mistake. It's better to find out and correct it now than to have it happen during the tournament.

I also had to keep in mind that I needed at least 24 questions from each book. Six of them would be used for the first three rounds of the tournament and six for the last two rounds. I made sure to keep six questions for the school finals and six just in case of a run-off due to a tie. I printed out each set of questions from a specific book on a different color of paper so I could visually keep track of them and make sure that one question from each book went in each marked envelope. On the envelope I wrote the name of the teams that were read this set of questions. I did this for both the Primary and Secondary Divisions.

Step Eight involved setting up the tournament. I already knew that for the Primary and Secondary Division, each team would battle three times before they were eliminated. What caused me the biggest problem was if a team had members that were in different classrooms. This meant that I couldn't always have the team battle during their library time and I was trying hard not to disrupt their regular classroom time. After the first year, I made the decision that we would do the Tournament during Book Week. Since this was a school-wide activity, it made scheduling a lot easier. I had Guest Readers the second year who came to read the questions while I or one of my assistants acted as timekeeper and scorekeeper. I ended up having the Primary Teams play two rounds because there were just too many teams to fit in the allotted time slots. We had 51 teams the first year and 52 the second year!

For the Secondary Division, each team played three rounds. I let my two assistants run that Tournament with the Guest Readers while I concentrated on the Primary Division. We had fewer teams, it went faster, and we needed fewer Guest Readers. We had 11 teams the first year and 15 the second year. The great thing about BOB is that it encourages reading, collaborative teamwork, and good sportsmanship. It is essentially a huge book club. There's a bridge between the home and the school library, with students and parents getting involved with books.

Step Nine involved getting Guest Readers for the Tournament. The first year I did the tournament, I read all of the questions for both divisions. It took too much time and if I was sick we had to cancel the battles for that day. I needed help so the second year I decided to ask all of the administrators to be a part of the tournament. I was successful in getting the Head of School, the Principal of the Secondary School, the two Vice Principals of the Primary School, the Director of Literary and Education, the Secondary Literacy Coach and the Secondary Counselor as Guest Readers. It was a delight to see the student's faces when they realized who was going to read their questions. Even the secondary students thought it was neat to see the administrators as active participants. The administrators also appreciated being involved in a positive activity and having the students interact with them. It was a win-win situation for all!

The last step involved rewards for the winning teams. This meant I had to decide if first, second and third place teams would get awards or just first and second place. To save money, I ended up going with just first and second place. To decide how much money to give each member, I looked at the cost of buying a book at the local bookstores in Doha. Primary level books cost from 30-55 Riyals (QAR), which translates to \$8-\$13, and Secondary books from 40-70 QAR which translates to \$10-\$16. I decided that 200 QAR for first place and 100 QAR for second place would be the correct amount. This would allow the first place winners to purchase two to three books and the second place winners to purchase one to two books. I kept the amount the same for both the Primary and Secondary Divisions with the reasoning that they had to read the same amount of books and they deserved the same reward for taking the time to be involved with BOB. I contacted a local bookstore and had them issue me gift certificates in the amount of 100 and 200 QAR which assured me that the students would buy books and not games or other things. This year, because we expanded it to all the EMS school campuses, I will purchase a trophy that will go to the winning school to display in their library. The trophy will stay at that school for one year and then be awarded to the school that wins the tournament the next time, in other words a traveling trophy.

## **Conclusion**

Using Battle of the Books as a literacy device for my students worked very well. I based this on the following criteria:

- The amount of students who opted to be a part of the contest
- Comments from the students that participated
- The number of students who wanted to participate but had waited too long to make the decision
- The fact that the number of students participating went up the second year for both divisions
- Teams that kept the same members from the first year

- More YR 5 and YR 6 students participated in BOB the second year
- Comments from the teachers about the fun that their students were having with the contest

This contest takes a great amount of time and the more people you have helping, the easier it is to coordinate. I felt the payoffs were worth the time and trouble, especially when I saw the faces of the students during the tournament. The first year of the tournament, our winners were in YR 6 for the Primary Division and YR7 for the Secondary Division. The second year of the tournament, our winners were from YR 4 for the Primary Division and a team that represented students in YR 7, 9, and 10 for the Secondary Division. The second year of the contest we also expanded BOB to the other EMS campuses in Al Khor and Al Wakra. They had heard about our tournament and they wanted to be a part of it. Al Khor will be fielding a team for the Primary and Secondary Divisions and Al Wakra only for the Primary Division because they do not go above YR 6 at this time.

For the third year of the contest we will be making more changes. We will have a minimum of eight books for each level and we will be bumping our reading levels up a bit. I will also be asking input from the other two schools in choosing the books to read for each division. At the writing of this paper we have not finished the All School Tournament, which will not happen until the second week of May.

For examples of the brochure, bookmarks, and Parent Permission Letter for Battle of the Books, please see this link to our school website: <http://emsdoha.net/> From there, click on the tab that says **Programs** and then **Library**. Scroll down just a little and you will see the following links:

- BOB Primary Information ([permission forms in English and Arabic](#), [brochure](#), [bookmark](#))
- BOB Secondary Information ([permission forms in English and Arabic](#), [brochure](#), [bookmark](#))

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