

RESEARCH CONNECTION

Seeking middle ground in Running Records of reading

By Joe Stouffer, PhD

Why this research is important

Classroom teachers may feel caught between disagreeing viewpoints in the so-called “Reading Wars” in which a “bottom-up” or word-recognition-focus (i.e., phonemic awareness and phonics – letter/sound associations culminating in automatic word recognition) is pitted against a “top-down” or whole language approach. This approach prioritizes a reader’s construction of meaning and includes a strategic consideration of the meaning and structural (i.e., grammatical) cues in a text. Rather than extend the debate between opposing philosophies, I suggest taking up a middle ground stance from which one may capitalize on strengths from each orientation. Through this additive lens, signposts, interpretations of reading behaviors, and linkages to instructional moves can be made more explicit for reading teachers.

How the research was conducted

I undertook a review of studies of Running Records, word-recognition and language comprehension skills, underpinning theories representing both orientations of reading instruction, historical perspectives of the Reading Wars, contemporary definitions of reading, and positions on the nature of effective literacy instruction.

What you need to know

Running Records are an assessment instrument teachers may deploy to record and analyze students’ reading to formatively plan instruction. Pundits of “bottom-up” approaches to reading instruction charge the cueing system (see Table 1) considered in Running Records’ analysis undermine the development of reading skills. Responding to such critiques, I offer a framework to justify Running Records’ continued use to assess students’ word reading and language comprehension skills.

A framework to describe students’ strategic actions, that is, the nature of readers’ thinking, was created to represent characteristics of proficient readers acknowledging both bottom-up and top-down perspectives. In this light, Running Records were re-examined to consider opportunities and provide examples of assessment and responsive teaching towards students’ skills in both word recognition and language comprehension.

What the researcher found

The following framework was created to describe students’ strategic actions that can be examined using a Running Record, reflecting a middle ground stance (see Table 2):

Table 1: *Cueing Sources Available to Readers*

Source of Information	Type of Information Considered during Reading
Meaning	What makes sense to the reader at this point in the text: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reader's text-relevant background knowledge (topics, content, culture) Reader's vocabulary
Structural	What sounds linguistically correct to the reader: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reader's grammar and oral language Structures of language used in the text
Visual	What looks right to the reader: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reader's control of sound/letter associations Reader's approaches to solving or breaking unknown words apart Reader's bank of instantly recognized words

Table 2: *Middle Ground Definitions of the Strategic Actions of Readers*

<p>Searching For, Using, and Cross-Checking Information</p> <p>Readers access, apply, and compare meaning, structural, and visual information to enable other strategic actions.</p>	<p>Solving Words</p> <p>Readers analyze visual information to recognize, solve, and acquire words, supporting themselves by considering the meaning and structural information.</p>
<p>Monitoring and Self-Correcting</p> <p>Readers notice errors, confusions, or mismatched sources of information and initiate moves to correct and confirm themselves.</p>	<p>Maintaining Fluency</p> <p>Readers decode proficiently and apply phrasing and expression to convey their text interpretation.</p>
<p>Adjusting</p> <p>Readers make flexible adjustments and persevere in solving problems and comprehending.</p>	

How this research can be used

This work provides teachers with a non-polarized and research-supported resource to navigate, respond, and support instructional decisions amidst adversarial or one-sided calls heralding the “right way” to teach reading. Since the publication of this work, a corresponding Running Record Analysis and Prompting Guide has been created and shared with teacher candidates at Brandon University and in the field with classroom teachers and literacy specialists in Manitoba and across Canada.

About the researcher

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