Reliability of Running Records

Whitley Starnes

Manchester College
Abstract

Accountability of a student’s reading performance falls on the classroom teacher. Due to teacher accountability, teachers must use reliable reading assessment tools. Running Records provide teachers with an effective way to assess a student’s reading performance. This simple and efficient reading assessment tool allows teachers to determine a student’s reading level as well as plan for further literacy instruction. The use of Running Records comes with many benefits; though, concerns about the reliability of Running Records make some people questioned its effectiveness in determining a student’s overall reading performance. Therefore, research presented in this paper supports the benefits and proves the reliability of running records as an effective form of reading assessment. To alleviate any concerns with the reliability of the scores, classroom teachers must use a researched based approach when administering Running Records.
Reliability of Running Records

Tommy sits down at the round table facing his first grade teacher with a book in front of him. His teacher tells him to read the title of the book and begin reading the story when ready. As Tommy reads out loud, his teacher marks his reading behavior on a record sheet. When Tommy finishes the book, his teacher asks him to retell the story. While Tommy retells the story in his own words, his teacher jots down notes on her record sheet. Later, after Tommy goes back to his desk to read independently, his teacher calculates the error rate, accuracy rate, and self-correction rate of his reading to determine Tommy’s overall reading performance. Once his teacher calculates the percentages for each category, she uses the scores to place him in an appropriate reading level. In addition, she uses the marks she made on the record sheet to plan further literacy instruction to meet the reading behaviors he struggled with while reading.

Tommy’s experience represents only one aspect of a student’s reading performance, which involves a teacher assessing a student’s ability to orally read fluently. In essence, important components of oral reading fluency include “word-reading accuracy, rate, and prosody” (Hudson, Lane, & Pullen, 2005, p. 706). With this in mind, accountability of a student’s reading performance falls on the classroom teacher. Due to teacher accountability, teachers need to use reliable reading assessments. Meanwhile according to Fawson, Ludlow, Reutzel, Sudweeks, and Smith (2006), “One of the most pressing challenges for identifying struggling readers is ensuring that the assessment instruments that teachers use to judge student reading progress produce reliable scores that adequately inform teachers’ intervention decisions” (p. 114). Hence, the use of an effective reading assessment tool that produces reliable scores will support teachers when planning further literacy instruction as well as help them make informed
decisions about a student’s reading performance. Therefore, the use of Running Records as a reading assessment tool comes with many benefits; however, in order to produce a reliable score from a running record, classroom teachers must use a researched based approach when administering Running Records.

Originally developed for Reading Recovery, running records provide classroom teachers with a formative literacy assessment technique that examines a student’s oral reading behaviors, analyzes his or her comprehension of a text, and determines a student’s appropriate reading level (Fawson, et al., 2006; Ross, 2004; “Running Record,” 2011). Normally taken at the earlier stages of reading, the first step in taking a running record involves a teacher selecting an approximate reading level for the student to read or the student chooses a passage from a book and reads at least one hundred words (“Running Records,” 2011; Tomkins, 2010, p. 463). Next, as the student reads, the teacher uses the running record symbols and marking conventions to make checkmarks for every word that a student reads correctly and also makes other marks to indicate reading behaviors such as errors like substitutes another word for a word in the text, omits or inserts a word, and/or has to be told a word. Moreover, teachers make note of repeats, mispronunciations of words, self-corrections, and circle the miscues, which include meaning, structure, and visual (“Running Records,” 2011). After recording the reading behaviors on the record sheet, teachers calculate the accuracy rate, error rate, and self-correction rate. To calculate the accuracy rate, the teacher needs to subtract the total number of words read by the total number of errors (not including self-corrections) and divide the difference by the total words read multiplied by one hundred. Then, the teacher calculates the error rate by dividing the total number of words by total number of errors made. Finally, the teacher calculates the self-correction rate by adding the number of errors and number of self-corrections and divides the sum by the number of self
corrections ("Running Records," 2011). Once teachers have calculated the scores, they can then analyze the Running Records by looking for patterns in reading behaviors to “determine how the student is growing as a reader and what strategies and skills should be taught next” (Tompkins, 2010, p. 463). On the whole, the ease and efficient scoring of Running Records as well as the reading behavior pattern shown on a Running Record sheet support teachers’ accountability for a student’s reading performance.

As an effective reading assessment tool, several benefits support teachers’ use of Running Records. Besides the ease and efficiency of Running Records, this assessment also establishes functional reading levels. Fawson, et al. (2006) describe these functional reading levels as independent, instructional, and frustration. In order to categorize a student’s reading performance, Fawson, et al. (2006) suggest using the accuracy rate of a student’s reading to determine the appropriate reading level. If a student scores above ninety-five percent, he or she read at the independent level. To read at the instructional level, a student must score between ninety percent and ninety-five percent. Finally, if a student scores below ninety percent, he or she read at the frustration level (Fawson, et al., 2006, p. 113). These functional reading levels simply allow teachers to determine a student’s reading level as well as organize their students into appropriate guided reading groups. For the students, establishing functional reading levels help them when choosing their own books because they can pick a book that matches their reading level. Furthermore, Running Records identify a student’s reading behaviors. Fawson, et al. (2006) and Hudson, et al. (2005) explain that reading behaviors involve how readers process written language as well as what strategies a student uses and fails to use while reading. Knowing these types of reading behaviors provides teachers with the necessary information to guide further literacy instruction as well as to use the reading errors to adjust literacy instruction.
Not only do Running Records show a student’s reading behaviors, but also, according to Fitzharris, Jones, and Crawford (2008), the analysis of running records show student improvement (p. 385). Overall, the use of Running Records as a reading assessment tool, benefits teachers because they allow them to progress monitor every aspect of a student’s reading performance.

Research conducted by Ross (2004) demonstrated a connection between teachers’ use of running records and a student’s reading achievement, which suggests another benefit of using Running Records frequently to monitor a student’s reading performance. In his research, Ross (2004) examines “the student achievement effects” by conducting a “controlled experiment in which a sample of schools implemented running records as a strategy for aligning literacy instruction with students’ need” (p.186-187). He compared the scores of running records with schools who implemented an alternative reading assessment tool. Participants in his study included principles, teachers, and selected students. Teachers used either a representative sample of their students or selected five of the neediest students who did not qualify for early literacy intervention. In Ross’ (2004) research, he found that “students from schools participating in the running records treatment outperformed students from schools participating in action research” (p. 190). In other words, the results from his study showed a positive effect on reading achievement from those schools who participated in the Running Record assessment tool, underscoring another benefit of using Running Records. When teachers incorporate the use of Running Records, they increase the chance for improvement in a student’s reading achievement. Running Records not only assess a student’s reading performance, but also teachers make informed decisions based on Running Records. As a result, the information given from a
Running Record allows teachers to support their students and increases the likelihood of reading achievement.

Even with the benefits of using Running Records and Ross’ (2004) research that shows the increased reading achievements of schools who implement Running Records in their literacy program, concerns arise with whether running records truly provide reliable scores. Fawson, et al. (2006) state “without reliability and validity data on students’ running record scores, parents, teachers, administrators, and policy makers cannot confidently use these results to inform teachers’ decision making or to determine school-level literacy policy” (p. 114). With this concern in mind, Fawson, et al. (2006) present two types of conditions that could possibly play a role in the unreliability of Running Records. First, factors within text and within the student may deem a Running Record score unreliable. For instance, a factor within the text involves the difficulty of the passage for a particular student to read. Two passages in the same reading level may differ in “internal linguistic structures or cognitive concepts” (Fawson et al., 2006, p. 114). As a result, the Running Record score cannot adequately determine a student’s reading level. Moreover, a factor within the student involves varied experience or what one would call prior background knowledge. A student reading a passage may not understand the context of the passage because he or she does not have prior knowledge of the context in the passage.

Secondly, teachers scoring or what Fawson, et al. (2006) call raters scoring can cause potential threats to the reliability of Running Records. Potential threats include the teacher’s level of experience with Running Records and the accuracy in recording on a Running Record sheet. Additionally, when analyzing Running Records, Fawson, et al. (2006) point out that teachers’ varied interpretations of a student’s response could pose a potential threat to the reliability of Running Records as well.
Therefore, when Fawson, et al. (2006) conducted their research on the reliability of Running Records, they took in consideration of the concerns and potential threats. In their research, Fawson, et al. (2006) “conducted 2 decision studies to ascertain the number of raters and passages necessary to obtain a reliable estimate of a student’s reading ability on the basis of a running record assessment” because their overall research purpose was to suggest changes needed in order for an outcome of a reliable Running Record score (p. 113 & 115). Participants in the study included ten first grade teachers who “taught in a large suburban school district in the western United States” as well as “represented a wide range of training in reading” (Fawson, et al., 2006, p. 115). In addition, twelve first grade students “who represented varied reading performance levels” participated in the study (Fawson, et al., 2006, p. 115). Through their research study, Fawson, et al. (2006) found that in order to reduce the unreliability of the Running Record score, one can increase the number of raters and average their scores (p. 117). Also, increasing the number of passages read and averaging these passages will reduce the source of error from the context of the text (Fawson, et al., 2006, p. 117). With these considerations in mind, the results of Fawson, et al. (2006) study found that when administering a running record, teachers must average the scores obtained by three reading passages in order to remove any concerns with the reliability of Running Records. When administering a running record, a classroom teacher who implements this researched based approach will produce reliable scores. Averaging the scores of three reading passages will also accurately determine functional reading levels as well as provide teachers with a way to stay accountable for their student’s overall reading performance.

When it comes to teacher accountability, classroom teachers must use reliable reading assessment tools that accurately determine a student’s reading performance. Running Records
help teachers when placing a student in appropriate functional reading levels as well as allow them to analyze a student’s reading behavior and determine further literacy instruction. Most importantly, Running Records provide teachers with a tool to progress monitor a student’s reading performances. Overall, the ease and efficient scoring make Running Records an effective and reliable reading assessment tool, and classroom teachers must make every effort to incorporate this type of assessment in their reading instruction.
References


assessment