Boundary Conditions of Font Size Effects for Judgments and Recall

Ashton Baker, Mia Park, LaRae Wade, Jessica Hayes, Michael Waldon, & Alan Harrison

Overview

People perceive items presented in larger fonts (48 pt.) as being more memorable than items in a smaller font size (18 pt.). However, Rhodes and Castel (2008) found no differences in recall as a function of font size. Yet other research has shown that people recalled more when information was presented in a small (8 pt.) font than when it was presented in a larger (12 pt.) font size (Sanchez & Goolsbee, 2010). These outcomes suggest that certain font sizes might affect judgments of learning (JOLs; i.e., confidence ratings regarding the likelihood of being able to recall an item) and recall performance differently. We examined if there are boundary conditions of font sizes affecting JOLs and recall performance. We categorized 16 different font sizes into four different font size categories. Participants studied 64 concrete nouns, half short (i.e., 3-5 letters) and half long (i.e., 7-9 letters) in length, provided JOLs, and attempted to recall items.

Key Findings

- JOLs increased as a function of the font size category and short words received higher JOLs than long words.
- Font size also impacted recall performance such that items in the Smallest font size category were recalled more often than items in the other three font size categories.
- Perceptual disfluency (i.e., the subjective difficulty of processing information) may play a role in the recall of smaller font sizes by inducing deeper processing during encoding, which in turn causes learners to give lower JOLs due to their increased effort.

Impact

The results from the present study imply that font size is a critical influence for memory predictions and actual memory performance. These results have direct implications for how to structure textbooks and instructional materials in order to enhance learning.

Acknowledgements

Dr. Jodi Price, Director of the Lifelong Learning Lab in the Psychology Department.