How Much is Remembered as a Function of Presentation Modality?

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ABSTRACT

According to a widespread claim often used for teaching recommendations, students remember 10% of what they read, 20% of what they hear, 30% of what they see, and 50% of what they see and hear. Clearly, the percentages cannot be correct, and there is no empirical evidence even for the ordering. To investigate the ordering, we used a laboratory paradigm that has already revealed some findings regarding the ordering of modalities for remembering information. In this paradigm, subjects are given messages instructing them to move in a grid of 4 stacked matrices by clicking on a computer mouse. The current experiment compared 3 modalities presented either once, see (visual words), hear (auditory words), read (visual words); twice in succession, see see, hear hear, read read; or in two different successive modalities, see hear, hear see, see read, read see, hear read, hear hear. We found better performance for messages presented twice than for those presented once, regardless of modality. For the twice-presented messages performance varied as a function of the second modality, with best performance overall for see and worst overall for read.

METHOD

• Subjects were given 72 messages, 12 of each of six lengths (one to six commands).
• Accuracy was scored in an all-or-none fashion on each trial.
• 144 college undergraduates participated.

RESULTS

Figure 1: A sample display showing movements for a message with 3 commands. Commands are shown in the Read presentation mode and heard in the Hear presentation mode; digits on the display here show required moves and are not seen by the subjects.

Figure 2: Symbols used for See presentation mode

Figure 3: Proportion of correct responses as a function of presentation mode, with the modes ordered in terms of increasing accuracy.

Figure 4: Proportion of correct responses for the presentation modes involving a single modality (Hear, Read, See) as a function of number of presentations (single, double) and message length.

Figure 5: Proportion of correct responses for the presentation modes involving two presentations of the messages as a function of message length and either the modality of the first presentation (top panel) or the modality of the second presentation (bottom panel).

CONCLUSIONS

When all 12 presentation modes are considered, there was a significant effect of presentation mode, reflecting, in part, the fact that the presentation modes with only one presentation yielded especially low performance and performance was best for the modes involving both See and Read (See Read and Read See) or See duplicated (See See) (Figure 3).

For the presentation modes involving a single modality, there was a significant effect of presentation number and a significant interaction of presentation number and message length. Double presentations yielded higher accuracy than single presentations for the longer message lengths where performance was not at the ceiling (Figure 4).

For the presentation modes involving two presentations of the messages, there was a significant effect of the modality of the second presentation, with the overall ordering in agreement with that proposed by the widespread claim (Read, Hear, See). The effect of the modality of the first presentation was not significant but also showed an overall advantage for See although Read was numerically better than Hear (Figure 5).

The widespread claim indicates that See Hear and Hear See is better than See alone and Hear alone, but the present results show that See Hear and Hear See were actually numerically lower than See See and Hear Hear. The widespread claim does not control for the number of presentations, which had a large effect. Also, Hear Hear was at least somewhat better than both Read Hear and Hear Read. Because two presentations in a single modality was sometimes better than presentations in two different modalities, the present results only partially confirm the ordering in the widespread claim.

REFERENCES


AUTHOR NOTE

This work was supported in part by NASA Grant NNX14AB75A to the University of Colorado.