The effects of road commentary training on novice drivers’ visual search behaviour

Initial investigation of hazard perception and eye-movements

Stephen J. Cantwell, Robert B. Isler, Nicola J. Starkey
Transport and Road Safety Research (TARS)
School of Psychology, University of Waikato, New Zealand
Challenges facing young drivers

Insufficient amount of quality supervised driving compared to recommended guidelines

- Poor situation awareness and hazard perception (McKenna et al., 2004, 2006)
- Failure to adapt speed to conditions (Cantwell, 2010)
- Risk taking behaviour & dangerous manoeuvres

(Nearest Zealand) Ministry of Transport, 2009
Maturing “executive” functions

Prefrontal cortical development is still taking place well into the mid-twenties, which means higher-level cognitive abilities have not yet matured in a teenager's brain.
Limitations of novice drivers

- Poor hazard perception
  - Perceiving immediate (and latent) hazards
  - Generating an appropriate driving response

- Inadequate situation awareness
  - Maintaining a comprehensive mental representation of the current road/traffic environment
  - Prediction and anticipation of the road situation in the near future

Horswill and McKenna, 2004, 2006; McKenna, Alexander, and Horswill, 2006
Hazard perception as a crash predictor

- Vulnerable to driving errors associated with inefficient visual search (Underwood et al., 2002; Crundall et al., 2004; McKenna et al., 2006) and poor cognitive skill (Deery, 1999)
  
  “… the single most common contributor to a crash was failure to search the roadway… not searching far enough ahead the vehicle… inattention, or failing to avoid distraction.”

- Horswill and McKenna (2004) suggest hazard perception skill as the most likely source of any skill gap between novice and experienced drivers

- The development of efficient visual search strategies is one of the fundamental skills marking the transition from novice to experienced driver (Underwood, 2007)
Hazard perception naturally develops with experience

Greater number of hazards detected as experience increases, while reaction times to hazards decrease. (Starkey, Isler, and Cantwell, 2012)
The difference between experienced and novice drivers’ visual search behaviour (Konstantopolus et al., 2010)
What is commentary training?

- There are several methods of commentary training
  - “Commentary involves the verbalisation of at least some of the driving-related contents of awareness, while actually driving though a situation (on road or simulated)” pp. 8 (Helman, 2008)

- Commentary is already employed as part of advanced police driver training in several countries.

- In our training, participants were asked to:
  - Describe everything that was occurring on the road environment relevant to the driving task (i.e., hazards)
  - And how they might adjust their behaviour accordingly
Previous commentary training research

- Mills, Hall, McDonald, and Rolls (1998)
  - Improved hazard detection, and response times
  - Improved in on-road driving assessment ratings

- Isler, Starkey, and Williamson (2009)
  - Demonstrated improvement in the number of hazards detected and response times within a very short period of training
  
  “… encourage drivers to actively search for hazards and may improve their situation awareness and lead to a better appreciation of the risks involved.”

  - Reduction of speed on approach to hazards (responsiveness)
Participants

Sixteen males and 4 females with learner licenses were recruited from two local high-schools

- Average age was 16.6 years (SD = 0.6)
- Held license for average of 11.6 months (SD = 11.7)
- Average self-report distance driven per week was 38km (SD = 38.9)

Participants were randomly allocated (gender balanced) to either non-training (control) or commentary training group
Commentary Training

- 2 practice trials for Hazard Perception Task
- 2 commentary practice videos with expert commentary
- 12 scenarios with participants providing commentary

No Training

- Baseline assessment (HPT 5 trials)
- 12 scenarios with participants observing from drivers perspective

Post-training assessment (HPT 5 trials)
Hazard Perception Task

Participants were instructed to click on immediate hazards that they detect while viewing the road videos.
Commentary training significantly improved the percentage of hazards detected between baseline and post-training assessments.

Interaction $F(3,17) = 6.944, p < 0.05, \eta_p^2 = 0.416$
Commentary trained participant

No training (control)
Commentary trained participant

No training (control)
Initial observations demonstrated some interesting differences between training groups, notably the location and duration of visual search throughout video scenarios.

Commentary trained participants demonstrated a significantly* greater number of fixation “clusters” potentially indicating longer search time for hazard rich regions.

* Training effect on fixation clusters: $F(3,17) = 12.802, p < 0.01, \eta^2_p = 0.416$
Evidence of broader spread of road-way search

Visual search dedicated to hazard rich areas
Summary of initial findings

- Commentary training might be a useful tool in enhancing hazard perception in novice drivers.
- Commentary might change the way drivers search the road environment, and allocate their visual attention.

Future directions

- Investigating the role of commentary seeing/perceiving hazards, and hazard detection times.
- A more detailed analysis of the effect of commentary on fixation distribution, duration; saccades, and interest areas (hazardous regions).
- Including experienced drivers in our analysis.
  - Can commentary potentially improve existing, poorly developed schema in experienced drivers?
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scant@waikato.ac.nz