Chapter XI

A Framework for Cognitive Skill Acquisition and Spreadsheet Training in End-Users

S.E. Kruck  
James Madison University, USA

John J. Maher  
Virginia Tech University, USA

Reza Barkhi  
Virginia Tech University, USA

ABSTRACT

It is well documented that electronic spreadsheet models utilized in many professions to enhance decision-making frequently contain errors that have negative effects on the ultimate quality of decisions. Limited research has been published that systematically identifies potential reasons for the causes of these errors, and what procedures can be taken to minimize or eliminate them. Our research provides initial evidence concerning this problem area by investigating how several important cognitive skills are affected by formalized spreadsheet training. Results indicate that one cognitive skill, logical reasoning, significantly increases after a six-week training period. Importantly, the greater the increase in logical reasoning skill, the more effectively the subject
performing developing competent spreadsheet models. These findings provide a meaningful step in more perceptibly understanding and defining important cognitive changes that occur in individuals as they undergo formalized spreadsheet development training. Further extensions of this research should more clearly refine our understanding of the cognitive changes that occur in spreadsheet developers and eventually cultivate the development of more efficient and effective training methods for spreadsheet model designers.

INTRODUCTION

In a knowledge-based economy where end-user computing empowers the users to accomplish cognitively intensive tasks, cognitive skills play a critical role in how individuals perform their tasks. One of the first end-user computing tools to gain widespread popularity is the electronic spreadsheet. Effective electronic spreadsheet model development skills are considered vital for workers in a wide variety of occupations. Employers have identified competent spreadsheet skills as one of the most beneficial fundamental computer literacy skills a worker can possess following word processing skills (see Davis & Leitch, 1988; O’Leary, 1989; Coy & O’Grady, 1992; Heagy & Gallum, 1994; Davis, 1997; AAA, 2000). However, it has been well documented that spreadsheet models developed by end users contain surprisingly high error rates (e.g. Brown & Gould, 1987; Davis & Ikin, 1987; Cragg & King, 1993; Janvrin & Morrison, 1996; Davis, 1997; AAA, 2000). Spreadsheet errors can have a dramatic effect on the performance and decision process of end users. Given the widespread use of spreadsheet models, it is critical to understand how spreadsheet training interacts with cognitive skills.

In this paper, we propose a framework that suggests spreadsheet training will influence four cognitive skills: logical reasoning, spatial visualization ability, mnemonic skill, and sequencing ability; and that these cognitive skills will influence the errors in spreadsheet models. We empirically test the framework to identify specific cognitive skills that influence errors in spreadsheet models developed by end users.

We use a block experiment (Cook & Campbell, 1979), where one group is the treatment group who will not receive spreadsheet training and another group will receive six weeks of spreadsheet training. We perform a pre-test and post-text analysis of the measures of the four components of cognitive skills in our framework (i.e., logical reasoning, spatial visualization, mnemonic skill, and sequencing). The results of the study lead us to modify the framework because only one of the cognitive skills, logical reasoning is found to possess the dominant effect while the
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