

Metacognition, Comprehension Monitoring, and the Adult Reader

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This article provides an overview and synthesis of the current literature on metacognition and comprehension monitoring among adult readers. It is organized around three major research questions: (1) How do adults conceptualize their own comprehension-fostering and comprehension-monitoring activities? (2) How effectively do adults evaluate and regulate their ongoing efforts to understand? (3) How successfully do adults assess the final products of their comprehension efforts? Cutting across these broad issues are questions concerning metacognitive differences as a function of reading ability, academic success, domain expertise, developmental level, and task variables. The research reveals that adults' conceptions of how they comprehend and how they monitor their comprehension are quite variable. In general, those who have more expertise, who are better readers, and who are more successful students seem to have greater awareness and control of their own cognitive activities while reading. The research also reveals that adults evaluate and regulate their ongoing efforts to understand, although there is considerable room for improvement in these skills. Finally, the research shows that adults are remarkably unsuccessful at assessing how well they have comprehended a text and whether or not they are ready to take a test on the material. The article closes with a discussion of recent intervention efforts aimed at enhancing the metacognitive skills of adult readers.

KEY WORDS: cognition; reading; reading comprehension.

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INTRODUCTION

In their 1984 review of the literature on metacognitive skills of reading, Baker and Brown (1984a) commented, "It is unfortunate that there is not more research activity in the area of adult metacognition. Anyone who has ever taught a group of college students must know that their metacognitive skills in a variety of domains could stand considerable enhancing!" (p. 380). Empirical support for this anecdotal observation was provided that same year in a survey by Simpson (1984) of study strategies used by college freshmen. Among Simpson's conclusions were the following: students use a restricted range of study strategies; they can rarely explain why a strategy is important to their own learning efforts; they use the same single strategy for most learning tasks; and they have little conception of how to check when they are ready for a test. Simpson offered three explanations for her disconcerting findings, all of which are undoubtedly contributing factors. (1) Students overrely on partially adequate strategies, such as underlining and rereading, which served them well in the past; (2) students do not generalize strategies they have been taught in one context to new situations; and (3) students do not engage in the cognitive monitoring activities of planning, checking, evaluating, and regulating, which are necessary for self-regulation of their own learning.

Researchers have apparently taken these concerns to heart, and we are now seeing increased attention to metacognition and comprehension monitoring in older readers. The purpose of the present article is to review this literature, with particular attention to research published within the past five years. We will begin by examining adults' metacognitive awareness about their reading strategies and their reported use of comprehension-monitoring activities. We will then turn to the comprehension-monitoring skills actually exhibited by adult readers, examining their ability to evaluate and regulate their ongoing comprehension. The next section of the article will focus on the self-assessment of comprehension and test readiness, a line of research that evolved somewhat independently of the literature on metacognition. Throughout these sections we will consider the relation of reading ability and academic performance to metacognition. A separate section will focus specifically on the issue of developmental differences. Finally, the article will examine some of the interventions designed to improve the metacognitive skills of adult readers.

A few comments about the scope of the review are in order. One frequently finds in the literature on metacognition a blurring of the distinction between strategies for comprehending and strategies for remembering. This is understandable given that effective studying has as a prerequisite effective comprehension. However, it is not the purpose of this review to examine the vast literature on study strategies; therefore, discussion of study strategies will be restricted to those that could legitimately be considered compre-