

Verbal 'Talk Aloud' or 'Think Aloud' Protocols and Applications to Research on Decision Making in Public Finance

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Overview

Think aloud verbal protocols is a data collection method where subjects are asked to talk aloud while solving a problem, explaining what they are thinking while performing the task at hand. The subject is asked to speak out loud whatever thoughts come to mind, providing a concurrent account of thoughts and avoiding interpretation or explanation of what is being done (Van Someren et al. 1994). The verbal 'think aloud' protocol offers a way to gain information about an individual's cognitive processes by using verbal reports and raising thoughts into consciousness (Ericsson & Simon 1980, 1998). Think aloud verbal protocols provides rich verbal data about reasoning during a specific problem solving or decision making task (Fonteyn et al. 1993). Think aloud verbal protocols have been used as data collection methods by researchers studying information seeking (e.g., Branch 2000, 2001; Murtaugh 1984) and information processing (e.g., Crutcher 1994; Payne 1994; Earle 2004), and can be useful for understanding decision making more broadly.

Example: Research on how drivers respond to flooded roads and what information they seek

My colleagues and I used verbal 'think aloud' protocols to examine how individuals proactively and reactively respond to instances of road flooding (e.g., plan for flooding or responding in real time to flooded roads), and how they obtain information about anticipated or current flooding. In our verbal 'think aloud' protocols, participants responded to specific flooding scenarios while verbalizing their thoughts as they consider different responses. Participants were given a small-scale warm up task to practice the think aloud protocol and become familiar with it. They were then given specific flooding scenarios and instructed to (1) focus only on responding to the scenario and not on producing the verbal report; (2) report only what is available to them consciously as they respond to the scenarios; and (3) not to introspect on their thought processes.

References and Recommended Reading:

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(http://echo.iat.sfu.ca/library/vanSomeren_94_think_aloud_method.pdf)

(Interested in conducting research using Verbal Protocols? I'd love to connect and talk about how we can collaborate.)