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Making It Easy: A Work-in-Progress Towards Guidelines for Designing Easy Language Multiple Choice Reading Comprehension Items

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Guidelines for creating multiple-choice reading comprehension questions (MCRC) do not cover the creation of Easy Language MCRC items for psycholinguistic studies. However, psycholinguists widely use MCRC items in reading research to assess participants' understanding of texts, and increasingly study populations that rely on Easy Language (EL), such as second language readers or readers with intellectual disabilities. Easy Language "refers to modified forms of standard languages, which aim to facilitate reading and language comprehension (...)" (Lindholm and Vanhatalo, 2021). Its core linguistic features include short, syntactically simple sentences, high-frequency and concrete vocabulary, consistent use of the same words for the same concepts, and the avoidance of negations and passive constructions. Constructing MCRC items for Easy Language materials is particularly challenging due to the reduced linguistic complexity, with short sentences and unambiguous wording. In this paper, we therefore propose a set of guidelines that will aid researchers in creating valid MCRC items for studies involving target groups of EL using EL texts, and enable them to claim that their RC data measures true reading comprehension.

This work is separated into two parts; first a systematic literature review on guidelines for constructing MCRC materials from 2016-2026 to identify gaps relevant to EL, with particular attention to considerations taken in relation to the target groups and implications for item design. Second, we present a work-in-progress toward a structured framework for designing MCRC questions for EL contexts, covering the following: all items must adhere to EL rules; the question item can be formulated as a question or a statement; and we adapt the structured annotation scheme of Berzak *et al.* (2020) to EL materials, motivating specific adaptations, most notably the omission of an incorrect-interpretation distractor, which is not feasible when texts leave little room for misinterpretation.

As next steps, we plan to adapt the set of item-writing flaws for the EL context, distinguishing those that make assessments unintentionally easier, such as implausible distractors, grammatical cues, or answer options identifiable without reading the text, from those that make them unintentionally harder, such as language that does not comply with EL norms or negatively framed stems. The next steps also include a structured reporting checklist to standardize how MCRC materials and design decisions are documented, improving transparency and reproducibility. We further plan to pilot and test the resulting MCRC items with EL target readers and a control group.

References

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