Evaluation of Computer Adaptive Testing Systems

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ABSTRACT

Many educational organizations are trying to reduce the cost of the exams, the workload and delay of scoring, and the human errors. Also, they try to increase the accuracy and efficiency of the testing. Recently, most examination organizations use computer adaptive testing (CAT) as the method for large scale testing. This article investigates the current state of CAT systems and identifies their strengths and weaknesses. It evaluates 10 CAT systems using an evaluation framework of 15 domains categorized into three dimensions: educational, technical, and economical. The results show that the majority of the CAT systems give priority to security, reliability, and maintainability. However, they do not offer to the examinee any advanced support and functionalities. Also, the feedback to the examinee is limited and the presentation of the items is poor. Recommendations are made in order to enhance the overall quality of a CAT system. For example, alternative multimedia items should be available so that the examinee would choose a preferred media type. Feedback could be improved by providing more information to the examinee or providing information anytime the examinee wished.

Keywords: computer adaptive testing; computer-based instruction; computer-based testing; distance education; evaluation; human-computer interface; interactive learning environments; online test; requirements

INTRODUCTION

The increasing number of students, the need for effective and fast student testing, multimedia-based testing, self-paced testing, immediate feedback, and accurate, objective, and fast scoring push many organizations to use computer-based testing (CBT) or computer assisted assessment (CAA) tools (Brown, 1997). But this is not enough. Current learning theories lead towards student-centred and personalized learning. There is also increased interest for
reducing cheating, reducing the examinee’s anxiety, challenging but not frustrating the examinees, as well as for immediate and continuous examinee guidance based on knowledge, proficiency, ability, and performance. Thus, many organizations are further driving towards computer adaptive testing (CAT) tools (e.g., GMAT, GRE, MCSE, TOEFL). CAT is a special case of CBT. It is a computer-based interactive method for assessing the level of a student’s knowledge, proficiency, ability, or performance using questions tailored to the specific student. The CAT system selects questions from a pool of precalibrated items appropriate for the level of the specific student. Wainer (1990) indicates that two of the benefits of CATs over CBTs are higher efficiency and increased student motivation due to higher levels of interaction provided. CAT can estimate the student’s level in a shorter time than any other testing method. CAT is based on either Item Response Theory (IRT) or Decision Theory (Rudner, 2002; Wainer, 1990; Wainer, Dorans, Eignor, Flaugher, Green, Mislevy, Steinberg, & Thissen, 2000). However, Lilley, Barker, and Britton (2004) argue that the stop condition of a CAT can create a negative atmosphere amongst examinees, which could result in the rejection of the CAT altogether. Examinees might consider that the fairness of the assessment is jeopardized if the set of questions is not the same for all participants. Furthermore, examinees expressed their concern about not being able to return to review and modify previous responses. Olea, Revuelta, Ximenez, and Abad (2000) show that allowing answer review decreases the examinee’s anxiety, and increases the number of correct responses and the estimated ability level of the examinee. Similarly, Wise and Kingsbury (2000) point out that when examinees are allowed to change answers, they are more likely to decrease their anxiety and improve their scores and score gains. Lilley and Barker (2003) show that learners with different cognitive styles are not disadvantaged. Also, CAT has the potential to offer a more consistent and accurate measurement of examinee’s abilities than that offered by traditional CBTs. Georgouli (2004) proposes an intelligent agent for self-assessment which adapts its material to reflect the needs of the individual learner, whether it is for studying or for testing.
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