The role of expressive full-body avatars and earcons and auditory icons in e-assessment interfaces

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***Abstract*—** This paper investigates the role and effectiveness of multimodal metaphors in e-assessment interfaces. It evaluates usability of specific combinations of multimodal metaphors on their own or in combination with other. The parameters of the evaluated usability included efficiency, effectiveness and user satisfaction. The empirical research described in this study consisted of three experiments of 30 participants each to evaluate the effect of visual text, avatars and images individually, avatars, visual text and recorded speech in combination with images.

The use of full body expressive avatars with earcons and auditory icons were evaluated with 30 users. This investigation assessed the role of an avatar as a tutor in e-assessment interfaces. The results demonstrated encouraging usability results. The effectiveness and applicability of avatars in e-assessment interfaces were observed and discussed.

***Keywords*—**e-assessment, multimodality, avatars, earcons, auditory icons.

I. Introduction

Learning and assessment are complementary to each other. Developments in user interfaces and the way that information is communicated continues to influence e-learning or e-assessment systems. Computer-mediated assessment, computer-aided assessment, online assessment and e-assessment are interconnected terms and often used in relation to the utilisation of information technology [1]. Assessments are generally conducted to assess students' progress and to assist on-line student learning. The design of the assessment is widely recognised as a challenge for e-learning systems. It is often an integral part of the learning software [2]. The enhancing of the quality of the learning experience is an important factor. Several pedagogical principles have been suggested to enhance the learning experience including assessment [3].

Several definitions have been introduced for e-assessment but in essence is the use of computers to elicit that a particular level in education has been achieved [4-7]. Usability is an important evaluating parameter in the development of interfaces for e-assessment. Usability examines the effectiveness, efficiency and user satisfaction of a user interface [8 and 9].

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II. Literature Review

A. Multimodality

In overall terms, the literal sense of mode is the technique through which a certain work is accomplished. The term "multimodal" refers to accomplishing a task via the use of a number of methods all combined together. Multimodal is in effect the coexistence of more than one communication metaphors [10]. In some cases, multimodality may prevent information overload to the user [11].

The term involves the use of multiple communication metaphors that are mapped to the human senses (hearing, touch, olfaction and taste) but several researchers distinguish between computing modalities and the sensory modalities of psychology. Sharon Oviatt suggest that multimodalities (e.g. speech, touch, hand gestures, eye gaze and head and body movement) are multimedia schemes of output" [12] and [13]. Generally, a multimodal interface is a human-machine interface that uses multiple channels of communication between user and the machine [14].

In this study, the term multimodal metaphor is used to indicate the use of auditory and visual metaphors to represent the information to be used in e-assessment methods. When designing multimodal user interfaces, the following must be considered [15]:

1) Selection of appropriate modalities to communicate the required information.
2) Combining and synchronising the presentation of the modalities.

A speech modal is a channel that is used to represent particular information to users using voice [16]. Natural speech involves the use of recorded speech that is recorded, stored and played back [13].

The presentation of information using sound assists to decrease the amount of text and graphic required in the interface [16]. Also, this will utilise other senses such as hearing and sight. Non-speech sound metaphors in auditory channels are non-verbal cues that transmit information around

ISBN: 978-1-61804-254-5

objects in the computer interface. These can be made of digitally recorded or synthesised musical instruments, everyday sound effects, or electronically produced pure tones [17-19].

There is a growing demand for research that recommends merging non-speech sounds (earcons and auditory icons) with graphical interfaces to decrease the visual workload which impact the users' performance [20]. According to [21] auditory icons are defined as "everyday sounds mapped to computer events by analogy with everyday sound producing events". They provide a method that sounds natural in representing data that is dimensional and also the represents the objects that are conceptual in specific computer schemes. The auditory icons allow the data to be categorised into different sets using a single sound [22]. One of the most important advantages of using these is that the sounds used in them are those which people hear in their daily lives, and link them with a specific action [23]. An example of this can be found in the virtual world where we would hear the sound of an object crashing into a wastebasket when the file is deleted, or marked for deletion. This category of auditory icons is like the sound effects which complement the visual events with an appropriate sound in a computer scheme. Yet, their purpose is not just simply to serve as entertainment tools but also to convey very important information regarding the events taking place in a computer scheme – this allows the user to listen to the sounds from a computer as he does from the everyday world.

Systems like EAR (Environmental Audio Reminders) play a variety of the non speech audio cues for offices and the common areas within EuroPARC in order to keep us up to date regarding the various events taking place around its building; Share Mon utilises background sounds in order to spread awareness; Sound Shark, the sonic finder, is useful when incorporating the auditory icons in an interface that is well known and used often – the simplicity of it leads people to underestimate the functions that auditory icons are capable of. For this reason, Gaver and Smith [24] demonstrated auditory icons used in a large-scale, multiprocessing, collaborative system called SharedARK, and called the resulting auditory interface SoundShark [25]. However [26] said the analysis of both source and sound are not usually significant although that [26] has introduced an ad-hoc synthesis to let users recognise sound instead of the analysis of source and sound. These systems display the extensive range of functions performed by the auditory icons. These include provision of information regarding the user's actions, the possibility of new actions and also the object's attributes that are not visible in the system. They also provide the background information regarding the modes as well as processes in a system that is more complex.

Earcons are short, non-speech, musical sounds that are used in the interaction processes between computers and users [27 and 28]. Earcons are associated with either objects or actions presented in a computer interface. As earcons require abstract associations with data, users must learn them in an initial training process [29].

Avatars are classified as naturalistic, abstract or realistic. It simulates a person as a graphical image of a user [30]. The avatar can be either the head of a man or woman, or a whole body. The idea behind the avatar is to simulate a real life person who naturally interacts with the user. For example, in e-learning, it can be used as a virtual lecturer [31 and 32]. Avatars often simulate body-gestures in order to better mimic human behavior. Body gestures are part of non-verbal messages. Non-verbal messages communicate a significant amount of information [33, 34]. Although body gestures are culture-dependent, strong messages of emotion and attitudes are communicated [35]. Body gestures in avatars are used to enhance speech and add emphasis [33, 36]. By using our hands, heads and feet, we can represent a very wide range of signs, signals and movements [35]. Avatars also help to "humanise" user interfaces. Humanisation has two objectives; to make the interfaces easier and more enjoyable to use and to make the interface more similar to humans [37]. The process of anthropomorphism offers interfaces to computer schemes via the provision of some human-like characteristics [38].

III. Aims and Objectives

The research question of this study is whether the use of avatars have a positive effect on users' learning achievements in an e-assessment interface. The objectives were:

3) To examine the impact on the usabilirty of e-assessment interfaces that utilise full-body expressive avatars with earcons and auditory icons.
4) To investigate the most effective metaphors for specific types of e-assessment.
5) To evaluate the user interaction in terms of efficiency (time taken to complete tasks), effectiveness (successfully completed tasks) and user satisfaction.
6) To measure the performance of recall and recognition tasks of use in the presence of expressive avatars with full body gestures, earcons and auditory icons.
7) To investigate the user performance during the execution of simple, moderate and complex interaction tasks and identify the implications to usability.
8) Determine the combined effect of the multimodal metaphors to e-assessment.

IV. Experimental Condition

The use of expressive avatars with body gestures together combined with earcons and auditory icons provides an investigation platform in e-assessment interfaces. The research assumptions are:

1) The provision of a realistic interaction with the user that resembles a face-to-face interaction.
2) Making the learning process easier and increase the user's interest, motivation, and learnability.

ISBN: 978-1-61804-254-5

V. Assessment Types and Multimodality

There are six types of assessment that communicate information to users in the e-assessment interface. These are error, comment, thinking, explain questions, suggestions and mark. Earcons communicated the correct answer to the question when spoken by the avatar. The aforementioned six types of assessment were grouped in three levels in terms of their ability to help; high, medium and low. Each of these levels was represented by a rank as follows: 1 for low, 2 for medium and 3 for high. This ranking refers to the potential of each metaphor (earcons and auditory icons) to assist in communicating the correct answer. For example, the first earcon consisted of only one note to communicate low ability, the second earcon consisted of two notes to show a medium rank.

Auditory icons were also used. The sound of "glass breaking" communicated an error, "opening a bottle lid" communicated that a comment is about to start, a "honking horn" indicated that the thinking has started, "a closing window" the explanation of questions, "door opening" that a suggestion is about to start, and a "hand clapping" that a mark is about to be communicated. Earcons and auditory icons were presented during the pause intervals so that they do not interfere with the spoken messages of the avatar.

VI. Sample and Experimental Procedure

A group of users (n=30) assessed the experimental interface in order to obtain an overall viewpoint of the suitability of the metaphors used. The procedure followed during the experiment is presented below:

1) Anonymous gathering of the sample profile (e.g. educational level).
2) Recording previous knowledge in relation to e-assessment interfaces, expressive avatars, earcons and auditory icons.
3) A short demonstration video introducing the e-assessment interface.
4) Presentation of example instances of the e-assessment interface with particular emphasis upon the multimodal metaphors used. The object of this training was to ensure the user's ability to understand and interpret each of these multimodal metaphors.
5) User performed the experimental tasks and all relevant user data was recorded. Each user was asked to answer 6 questions connected to the delivered assessment type. The questions were of two types; recall and recognition.
6) Post-experimental user questionnaire that gathered their views regarding the various multimodal metaphors used. Users also had the opportunity to provide suggestions or comments for improvement.

The independent variables were:

1) Multimodal metaphors. These were earcons, auditory icons and expressive avatars with body gestures.
2) Types of assessment. These were error, comments, thinking, explain question, suggestions and mark.
3) Assessment questions. These questions included recall and recognition in order to evaluate the users' learning achievement attained from the information presented by the tested e-assessment interface.

The dependent variables were:

1) Completion level (correct answers): This is the number of successfully completed tasks. It was measured by the frequency of correct answers to the recall and recognition questions linked to the communicated assessment.
2) Involvement of users with the type of assessment: This was measured by the number of users who correctly indicated these features after being communicated by the non-speech sounds.
3) Users' recognition of earcons and auditory icons: This was measured via the number of users who successfully interpreted the auditory stimuli in the context of being communicated in the experimental interface.
4) User Satisfaction: It was measured using questionnaires to gather the views of users.

VII. Sample profile

The test sample consisted of 30 users who took part in the experiment individually. The age profile of the sample consisted of 18 – 24 (13%), 25-30 (26%) and 31- 41 (60%). The gender ratio was 60% male and 40% female.

The educational profile of the sample consisted of 14 users (43%) at a postgraduate level and 17 users (56%) at an undergraduate level. 26% of users used computers for between 1 and 5 hours per week, 20% for 6 to 10 hours and 53% for more than 10 hours and 76% of the sample had knowledge about multimodality and e-learning applications. 66% of the sample used internet for surfing and 23% for education. At a pre-experimental level, only 26% of the sample thought that e-assessment would enhance on-line e-learning applications.

VIII. Results and analysis

The following provide descriptive and statistical analysis of the results obtained from the experiment in terms of achievement level, involving (in terms of correct and incorrect users' answers) in addition user satisfaction, and users' views regarding the non-speech sounds that accompanied the avatar body gestures as assist. This was the results of the experimental group consisting of 30 volunteers who took part in the study. In addition, the levels of significance in students responses was examined using the nonparametric Chi-square statistical test at $\alpha = 0.05$ indicating significant difference when p-value was found less than 0.5.

IX. User achievement

The frequencies of correct answers to the assessment questions were used to assess the users' achievement. Each user answered nine questions using recall and recognition methods. The total number of questions was 180 (30 users x 6 questions per user) equally distributed over the two types.

ISBN: 978-1-61804-254-5

Fig. 1 shows the percentage of successfully completed tasks (correct answers were provided by users) by users grouped according to assessment and question types. The percentage of successfully completed tasks with correct answers was 78%. This statistically significant with chi-square value at 0.200, cv = 3.84, $p<0.05$. For recall tasks or questions, the successful rates were higher than that for the recognition tasks or questions.

The response to the 90 questions was 78.8% for recall and 87.7%. The difference between correct and incorrect answers was significant in both assessment question types; recall chi-square value at 16.8, cv = .200 $p<.05$ and recognition 7.4, cv=0.200, $p<0.05$. The percentage of the sample who correctly answered questions linked to "involved thinking" was 86.7% and for "error" 83.3%. The other results were 73.7% for "more suggestion", 70% for "explain question", 60% for "mark" and 53.3% for "comment".

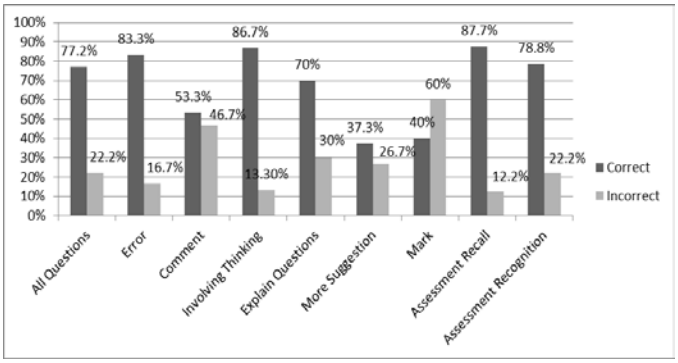

Fig. 1 Correct and incorrect percentages of answers achieved by users for all questions, assessment types and assessment question types

Table. I Chi-square values and significance levels relating to the achievement level

Variable	Chi-square value	Asymp. Sig.	Significance
All assessment question	.200a	.905	No
Assistance Type			
Error	13.333[a]	.000	Yes
Comment	.133[a]	.715	No
Involving Thinking	16.133	.000	Yes
Explain Questions	4.800a	.028	Yes
More Suggestion	6.533a	.011	Yes
Mark	1.200a	.273	No
Assessment questions			
Recall	16.800[b]	.000	Yes
Recognition	7.400[b]	.025	Yes

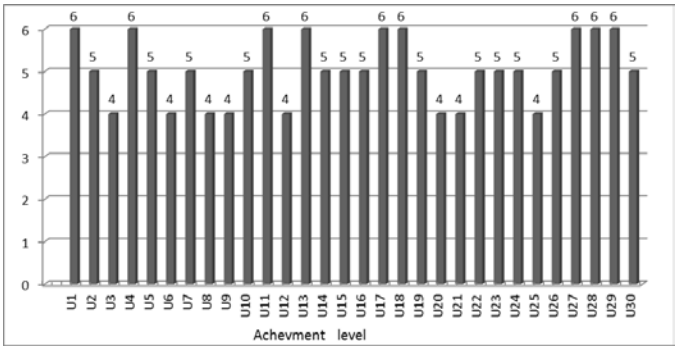

Fig. 2 the number of correct answers provided per user

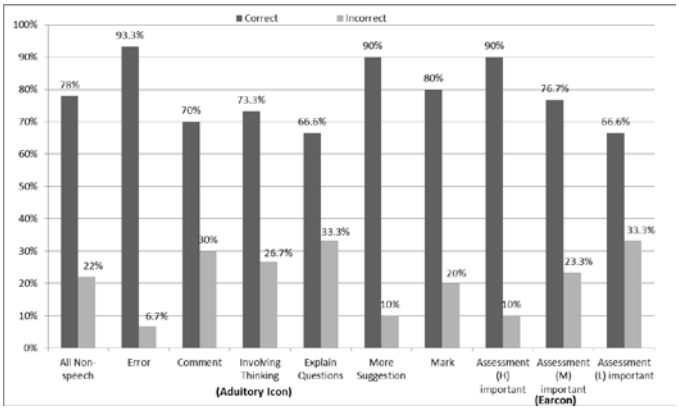

Fig. 3 correct recognition of users of the assessment types that were communicated by non-speech sounds, earcons and auditory icons

Table I shows that the outcomes were significantly dissimilar for correct and incorrect answers for error, thinking, explain question and more suggestion but there was no significance for comment and mark. Fig. 2 shows the correct answers per user in the sample. Nine users (1,4,11,13,17,18,27,28, and 29) answered each question successfully.

The multimodal metaphors used (expressive avatars with full body gestures, auditory icons and earcons) improved the delivery of the assessment content in the e-assessment interface. The auditory messages increased the volume of information communicated by the avatars but did not cause an information overload to users.

X. User Involvement

On completion of the achievement tasks, users were asked to do two more "involving" tests. Users were provided with six different assistance messages using auditory stimuli and they were requested to indicate the type of non-speech sound that was the most effective. The total number of questions was 180 (30 user x 6 questions per user). Fig. 3 shows the correct responses of users to this task related to all non-speech sounds, earcons and auditory icons.

The results ware statistically significant ((1)=15.6, cv=3.84, $p<0.05$). The majority of the users recognised correctly the assessment types communicated via auditory icons. More specifically, 93.3% of the sample (28 users) correctly recognised "error" message using an auditory icon similar to a "broken glass", 90% (27 students) accurately determined the "suggestion" message using a sound similar to a "bottle opening" and 80% (24 users) recognised the "mark" message using a "hands clapping" sound. This percentage decreased to 73.3% and until 66.6% for the remaining assessment types.

Users were requested to perform three tasks with questions that were communicated using non-speech stimuli in order to determine the high, medium or low level of the provided assistance. 90% of the sample (27 users) correctly identified the "high importance" message type compared to 76.7% (23 users) for the "medium importance" and 66.6% (20 users) for the "low importance". In a subsequent evaluation, three types of auditory stimuli were played for each of the assessment types and the importance level of the assistant type. Users had

to distinguish the sound that linked each of the assessment types and its level of importance. The obtained results for the non-speech sounds, earcons and auditory icons were encouraging. In total, 84% of the tested sounds were correctly recognised by users. This outcome was highly significant ((1) = 15.6, cv = 3.84, $p<0.05$). 100% (30 users) of the sample correctly recognised the auditory icon that sounded like a "broken glass" to communicate an error and 93.3% for the sound that resembled "opening a bottle" to communicate a suggestion. However, the percentages for the other auditory icons used were 76.6% and 70%.

The earcons used to communicate high, medium and low importance of a message were correctly recognised by all users. These results suggest that the tested auditory icons and earcons were successfully interpreted and more easily remembered by users when utilised in e-assessment condition to signal the importance of particular content delivered by a body gesture. The responses of users were positive (see Fig. 4) with respect to their views and feelings about earcons and auditory icons used interactively. However, 70% of the users felt irritated when they heard the sounds through the experiment. It is noteworthy that there was some difference in user frustration. There was a small difference between agreement and disagreement of 53.3% and 46.7% respectively. For usefulness, 86.6% of users found these sounds to be helpful and 76.6% of users felt that the presentation of sound assisted them to concentrate with the presented content.

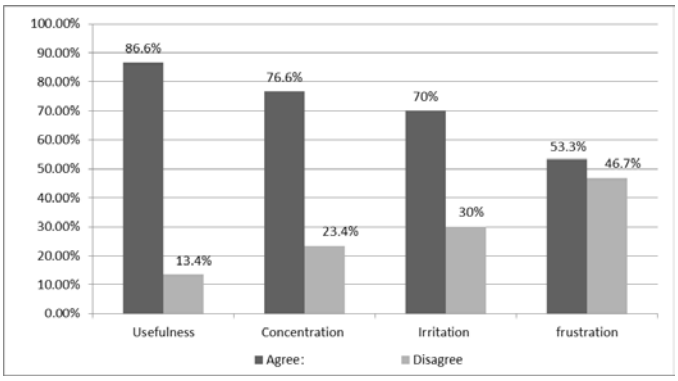

Fig. 4 Results of the user evaluation toward the non-speech sound

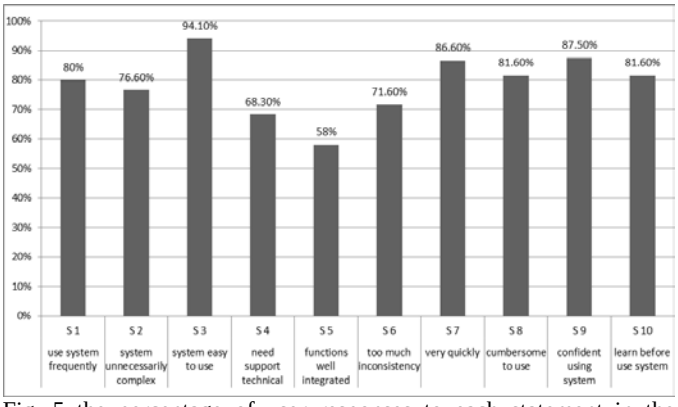

Fig. 5 the percentage of user responses to each statement in the satisfaction questionnaire

XI. User Satisfaction

User satisfaction was measured using a questionnaire composed of 10 statements. Users provided an answer using a 5-point Likert scale [39, 40] ranging from strong disagreement to strong agreement. These findings provided an overall viewpoint of the users' attitude towards the different aspects of the Auditory Avatar Body Gestures condition.

Fig. 5 shows the user views on their satisfaction for particular aspects of the experimental platform. The mean score for user satisfaction was 81%. The parameters expressed in statements S1, S3, S5, S7, and S9 were the most agreed by users. 85% of the users agreed that the system functions were well integrated (S5) and that most users are likely to learn quickly (S7). 78.5% of users welcomed the use of the auditory icons and expressive avatars (S9). 94.1% of users would use the e-assessment interface again and 80% thought that the interface was simple to use.

Some users disagreed with statements S2, S4, S6, S8, and S10 with rates fluctuating between 68.2% and 81.5%. 81.5% of users needed training to use the e-assessment interface (S10) and 68.2%, disagreed that using the interface requires the need for technical support (S4). Overall, users welcomed the use of the expressive avatars with spoken messages, auditory icons and earcons. On balance, the user satisfaction results were more positive than negative. This demonstrates, from the user satisfaction prospective, that there is a clear prima facie for the inclusion of multimodal metaphors in e-assessment and e-learning applications.

XII. Discussion

This experiment showed that the users had an increased level of concentration on the delivered assessment content. This increased concentration was due to the inclusion of interaction metaphors of diverse modalities in the tested condition. The textual metaphors combined in the condition with body gestures of the assistant avatar contributed to capturing the user's visual attention towards the provided information. At the same time, additional auditory explanations about this information were presented by the voice of the full body gesture avatar. Non-speech sounds did not appear to influence concentration as users were engaged with the assessment content communicated via auditory stimuli. Consequently, users were able to present the correct answer. The results of this experiment showed that user achievement levels were significantly assisted by the addition of earcons and auditory icons that aided the contribution of the body animated virtual instructor to achieve both types of the required evaluation tasks.

Auditory icons significantly assisted users to successfully complete recall and recognition questions. However, earcons were more effective in recall questions than in recognition questions. The earcons used in this experiment were less helpful compared to auditory icons. The outcomes of the experiment indicated that users were satisfied significantly with the inclusion of auditory icons and earcons in evaluating the e-assessment interface (see Fig. 4). Most users stated that these sounds assisted their involvement and did not divert their concentration. Moreover, the auditory icons were chosen

because they were the closest environmental sound mapping for the communicated information. Additionally, each of these sounds indicated one meaning at a time and they were used consistently throughout the auditory body gestures avatar interface. This multimodal approach to the e-Assessment interface generated a generally improved user satisfaction and performance. Finally, the obtained results suggest that utilising non-speech sound with body gestures in the form of avatars enhances, to a large extent, the usability and user involvement within the delivery of information in e-Assessment learning interfaces.

XIII. Conclusion

The experiment presented in this paper investigated the achievement level and user involvement with the use of earcons and auditory icons used as complementary auditory signals to indicate the dissimilar assessment types as presented by a virtual instructor. The experiment also investigated users' satisfaction. A total of 30 students took part in the experiment to assess the e- Assessment interface as an extension to the interface tested in the previous experiment by adding of Non-Speech sounds. The results showed that these sounds were effective in directing the users' attention to important parts of the Assessment, and contributed positively to enhance user achievement levels in different learning activities. Furthermore, these sounds were memorable, understood, and increased user satisfaction and enjoyment. Consequently, the use of these metaphors was discovered to be significantly useful to enhance the usability of an e- Assessment interface. Ultimately, this study showed the addition of auditory non-speech metaphors to an Avatar Body Gestures condition to allow the user to engage with diverse types of Assessment and questions. Three types of multimodal metaphors were presented which were included in the interface: visual-only metaphors (text which is Assessment type content), audio-visual metaphors (speaking avatar with body gestures) and auditory metaphors (earcons and auditory icons). The collection of experimental data was mostly focused on observations and questionnaires and contributed to the valuation of user's involvement and enhanced user ability performance, such as achievement level and user satisfaction. The results indicated that the users were satisfied, significantly with the inclusion of auditory icons and earcons. Mostly of students stated that these sounds were neither irritating nor frustrating, helped their involvement and did not divert their concentration.

The results of this study highlight the significance of the multimodal metaphors in enhancing learnability performance, as well as the usability of e-Assessment interfaces, in terms of achievement level and user satisfaction.

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